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A SAGE OF SIXTEEN

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HUMPHREY MILFORD

"'ELMA, DO YOU REMEMBER SOME PRESUMPTUOUS THINGS I ONCE SAID TO YOU IN THIS PLACE?'"

A SAGE OF SIXTEEN

L. B. WALFORD

HUMPHREY MILFORD
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A SAGE OF SIXTEEN.

CHAPTER I.

THE SITUATION.

WHEN Elma went to Park Lane she was called "a sage." No one ever thought of calling her "a sage" at Haverstock Hill.

At Haverstock Hill she lived—at Park Lane she was to be found every Wednesday afternoon. Nevertheless she was scarcely more at home in, and, after a certain fashion, an inmate of, the one house than of the other.

Let us explain. Elma was an orphan, and Sir Thomas Alfreton—who was a very great

personage as personages go, rich, and popular, and esteemed withal—was her nearest living relation; but for the present Sir Thomas neither had nor could have very much to do with his young ward. It had been his dead brother's expressed injunction that the little girl should be brought up by a certain Miss Exeter, and Miss Exeter was entirely out of Sir Thomas's world, and could not possibly enter into his calculations. She lived—he did not know where she lived. Lady Alfreton knew, he averred. Lady Alfreton was much attached to poor Henry's child, and had her as much at Park Lane as possible. But what could be done with a girl whose parents wished her to be brought up at a boarding-school? Had it not been for that boarding-school, he did not see, for his part, why Elma should not have lived with them, and had Juliet's old governess, now that Juliet no longer needed her. As it was, however, as it was, Sir Thomas—shrugged his shoulders.

He knew his niece if he met her on his own doorstep, or on the staircase, or if she accosted him with a "How d'ye do, uncle?" when he was

mounting for his daily ride: he probably would not have known her had she passed him in the Park, or looked down upon him from a gallery of the House of Commons.

With the rest of the family Elma was, however, infinitely more thought of—when they had time to think; and more beloved—when they could find room in their hearts to love.

Between one Wednesday and another they would forget their weekly visitor, it is true. Lady Alfreton would look round astonished, when reminded by her maid that Joseph or some one must be sent to fetch the young lady before two o'clock; but there would be no unkindness in the astonishment. Nay, it was invariably understood that her ladyship was rather pleased than otherwise when told Wednesday had come round once more—and that, so much before it had been expected; and Juliet, coming in from the Row, would cry, "What, Elma! here again?" quite heartily for her; and Piers's "Hullo, Elma! half-holiday again, eh?" would be really brisk for him, when their young cousin was seen peering

over the banisters on the all-important afternoons.

"How are you, young sage?" would be Piers's next.

"Very well, thank you," the "young sage" would rejoin. "Why in the world do you call me that, Cousin Piers?" she would add, suddenly.

There never was much attempt at explanation. They knew, one and all, what the term signified to them, but they did not care to enter into the subject with Elma.

"I suppose they do not think you so wise at Haverstock Hill?" one day Juliet had suggested.

"No, indeed," and Elma had laughed outright.

At Haverstock Hill it would be "Elma, you baby!" or "Elma, you goose!" more likely; and it is a fact that whereas Elma's fashionable aunt was wont to aver that, do what she would, she could not but stand in awe at times of the terrible wisdom and severe sense of that wonderful child, Miss Exeter, on the other hand, would hope that Elma's tongue had not run away with

her in her uncle's house, and would be fain to stop her ears lest she should be swept away by the torrent of frivolity which would burst from the little holiday-maker on her return thence.

Thus it will be seen that my youthful heroine was regarded from two distinctly different points of view.

It would have amazed good Miss Exeter as much to have heard her young charge accused of over-sobriety, as it would Lady Alfreton to have known that the unconscious mentor who gazed at her out of a pair of limpid eyes when sometimes, absorbed in an exciting topic, she would forget the child was by, and "be a little, a very little, inclined to talk as other people do, you know, my dear" (this was her ladyship's confidence thereafter)—it would indeed have struck the delinquent dumb to have known that the same Elma, before whose solemn silence her whispers had died away, would in all probability be called to order as a "feather-brain" and a "rattle-pate" at the close of the same day.

No two sets of ideas, no two daily routines,

no two views of life generally, could have been found more absolutely opposed to each other, than those possessed by the denizens of Sir Thomas Alfreton's mansion and Miss Exeter's corner house. Elma was the sole connecting-link between them.

Thus Miss Exeter: "It is a great thing for my dear pupil to have such relations. They trust her so entirely to me, and trust me so entirely with her, that they never attempt to interfere with my authority, nor seek to alter my plan of education. No expense is spared, and I am permitted to carry it out as I think best for dear Elma's advantage. Her poor mother left her to my care"—here Miss Exeter would bridle softly, and the pride of her heart would let itself appear in the faint glow which overspread her cheeks—"it was Mrs. Henry Alfreton's dying request to her husband, that the education of their only child should be committed to me. Therefore I should under no circumstances have agreed to forego my claim," she would continue with renewed animation; "but it is pleasant to feel that such a

suggestion has never even been hinted at; and what is more, that since neither Sir Thomas nor Lady Alfreton have so much as once made an inquiry or a request, I may hope that they repose an equal confidence in me to that which was expressed by the other members of the family, when it became known that Elma was to become an inmate of my house. Nothing that Sir Thomas or Lady Alfreton could possibly bestow upon their niece is equal, in my opinion, to their abstaining from all interruption of her studies and direction of her time."

Good creature! Had she but guessed to what she owed such abstention!

Hark to Elma's aunt on the same subject. "Yes, of course, my dear, what Juliet says is very true. We are all fond of Elma—poor dear Henry's only child, you know; but then what can we do? How her poor dear mother could ever have dreamed of making such a request, and how my poor dear brother-in-law could ever have been so quixotic as to carry it out, I cannot, no, I can *not* imagine. I call it being cruel to his own daughter. Sir Thomas thought himself

obliged to let all Captain Alfreton's arrangements stand," pursued the speaker, plaintively, "and —oh, did I not tell you what they were? No? The truth is this—but I am really ashamed to acknowledge it—that the child is at school somewhere in a remote part of London; at—at Haverstock Hill, in short,—at a Miss Exeter's school; Miss Exeter having been governess to Mrs. Henry Alfreton, and having no doubt established a sort of hold over her. I know nothing about Miss Exeter nor her school," Lady Alfreton would proceed; "I told Sir Thomas that he really could not expect me to know, and he quite agreed. Had Elma been left entirely to us, we would have done the best we could for her, but, as it is, she is quite out of our hands, and in Miss Exeter's. She cannot be in the hands of two people at once, can she? I have no doubt Miss Exeter is a worthy creature, but a school at Haverstock Hill, you know! I cannot imagine why she should have it there; I am sure there are plenty of other places—there is a school just round the corner here; and if Elma had but been placed there, it would only have

been my maid's running in and running out—but, however, there is no use in saying anything now. As long as Captain Alfreton—Henry, you know—was alive, we were not required to know anything about the child, and—and—" here even the very fine lady would move in her chair with a dim uneasiness, and a sense of being on thin ice—"and indeed poor Henry never asked nor expected it"—(Elma had only been once within her uncle's doors at the period thus referred to)—"but directly Sir Thomas heard of his brother's death," the narrator would recommence more briskly, "he said the very first thing, 'We must see more of that little girl.' Ever since then, we have done all we can for Elma. She spends every half-holiday with us—that is, every Wednesday afternoon—though it is such a distance to send, and then she has always to be sent back again as well. We do not grudge the trouble. Elma is a favourite with us all; and Sir Thomas has begun to say something about having her down at the Towers in the autumn. As soon as she leaves this tiresome school—that is, as soon as she is eighteen, for I am told

she is to remain with Miss Exeter until she is eighteen—it will be different. We can then begin to consider what is to be done. Whether Sir Thomas will have her to live with us or not, I do not know. It must depend upon circumstances. But for the present, and as long as we have a mere school-girl to deal with, we can do no more than we do already. It is simply out of the question that there can be any constant comings and goings, and tiresome letters, and interviews, and appeals, between this Miss Exeter and ourselves. As she has managed hitherto, so she must continue to manage. Sir Thomas pays the bills, and there it ends." With which complete exposition of the subject, Sir Thomas's wife, who had a way of suddenly letting go her hold of energy and interest as soon as she had got to the length of her tether, would sink back upon her sofa-cushion exhausted, and fan away the last breath of a troublesome subject.

But, to be sure, Elma knew nothing of all this. How was she to know? Who was to tell her?

She was, as even her aunt had acknowledged, a favourite, and a favourite who had no idea that she could ever have been anything else. It had never, from the first, occurred to her to doubt her welcome in the strange house, nor to wonder why it should have been strange. After the second visit, she had felt as much at home in it as if she had been born within its precincts. All within were her friends. When her own joyous peal of the door-bell was heard—Elma always rang her own bell and rapped her own knock—the most apathetic, supercilious John Thomas in the world would half-smile to himself as he strolled leisurely towards the door. When Lady Alfreton's dressing-room door would fly open and the little figure fly in, the unsympathetic, unresponsive Abigail engaged in attendance, who had only the shortest of answers and crossest of faces for her own mistress, would respond almost pleasantly to Miss Elma's greeting. Elma's aunt would suffer herself to be kissed with some approach to complaisance. Juliet would permit her hat to be torn from her head and perched upon her cousin's, and

her gloves, laces, and ribbons to be severally tried on and tossed about, without remonstrance. And Piers—Piers would come home to luncheon the days that Elma was to be in Park Lane.

CHAPTER II.

"MISS EXETER'S FACE."

THERE was something so fresh and fragrant, so daisy-like and dewy-like, in the bright young creature who thus from time to time woke up the jaded household into something like life, by the force of her own exuberance and effervescence, that the name whereby she was best known there would have seemed strangely out of place to a chance visitor. What was there, what could there ever be, to suggest the idea of a "sage" about this sunny-faced, dimpling Elma? It was certainly no great proof of superior wisdom to spin like a humming-top all over the floors of the great, solemn reception-rooms; to whirl in and out of the windows on the balcony, inspect every card upon the mantel-

piece, inquire into every innovation, turn every pocket of the mansion, as it were, outside in. Elma would pull open her aunt's wardrobe, tumble about the articles on her toilet-table, peer into her jewel-cases, try on her newest mantles and bonnets, and trail her best silk skirts in front of the mirror, with a delight which it did one's heart good to see. Elma had an interest in everybody, and a thousand questions to ask about every new-comer who entered the household. Her aunt and cousins received through her the most of whatever information they possessed about the inferior members of it. She could tell them where Jane came from, and what was Susan's parentage. She would apply for a remedy when Joseph had the toothache. Even Lady Alfreton found herself obliged to be pleased, when instructed that her own maid had known Elma's mother's maid. There was a great deal of the child, but there was nothing of the sage, in all this.

But for all that, the sobriquet, bestowed by Piers, stuck.

It had chanced to be given on a day when the family party had been augmented by the addition of some of his own and Juliet's friends at luncheon, Elma being present. A topic had been started, such a topic as is current enough in a London dining-room, not particularly objectionable, but new to simple, unsophisticated ears. Elma had drunk in every word, and every word had made her blue eyes enlarge, and her innocent heart wonder and meditate. This had been shown upon her face. All at once the talkers had ceased, some of them a shade confusedly; and Juliet had, perhaps for the first time in her life, spoken sharply to her young cousin; and Piers had laughed.

They had demanded of what she was thinking, and she had coloured a little, but had truthfully owned to reflections not exactly such as were usual in Park Lane, to which no one had known very well how to reply; and Piers, with another laugh, had called her "a sage."

Whenever the same scene recurred, and from time to time it would recur, it inevitably concluded with Elma's hearing herself so styled.

Lady Alfreton adopted the term, Juliet rang the changes on it, and even Sir Thomas knew to whom it referred. It might be that one and all fancied in it some curious kind of antidote towards certain faint, uneasy qualms which would now and again steal across their consciences when Elma was by. It might be that they considered it a counter-charge to the solemn gaze which, in spite of themselves, could not but be felt disconcerting from such a chit.

With Elma herself they could not be angry; she was such an irresistible, irrepressible little witch, they said; but they rebelled in their secret souls alike against her silent protest, or against the utterance which they themselves would extort. It was all Miss Exeter, they would tell each other aside—Miss Exeter's doing —Miss Exeter's teaching; and by-and-by they came to dub the face which was the bugbear of the party—"Miss Exeter's face." When there had been a "Miss Exeter's face" visible during any period of a Park Lane half-holiday, something of this kind might be heard afterwards.

"Juliet, my love, do learn to be a little more careful before that child."

"Mamma, I thought I was careful. I meant to be most particularly careful."

"Recollect that she knows nothing of the world."

"Recollect, mamma? We have no chance of forgetting."

"And you would not wish to vex her?"

"Vex Elma? No, indeed. But, mamma"——

"Well, my love?"

"Was I ever—at any time, when I was ever so young, and had seen ever so little—was I ever like what Elma is now?"

"Never," replied Lady Alfreton, with the most absolute truth. "Never!" she would continue, with rising energy and emphasis; "it is all Miss Exeter's doing."

Which, however, was, we may inform our reader, neither the truth, nor anything like it. Miss Exeter, an excellent creature, simple, humble-minded, single-hearted, and devoted to "duty," in whatsoever form it presented itself, was the last person in the world to have in-

structed her pupil in abhorrence of the world's ways, its fashions and follies, for the very plain reason that she knew little or nothing about them herself. Had Elma gone to her—but Elma would have scorned to go to her, or to any one, telling tales behind backs. Elma might think her own thoughts, and feel her own feelings, and turn over the same in her own young mind after the occasion which had called them forth had gone by—but not a word to Miss Exeter.

Miss Exeter only knew that Lady Alfreton had taken her niece to pleasant places, and given her pretty presents, and let her depart with kind injunctions to come again. She only heard that the cousins had been busy with this and that, and had allowed Elma to join in what they were doing; that Juliet had let her be present whilst trying on her new Court dress, and Piers had shown her the whole collection of photographs he had brought back with him from his foreign travels. Miss Exeter thought the Alfretons must be delightful, cultivated, high-bred people, and was more and more convinced

of the benefit to the orphan Elma that must arise from her relationship to such a house, as time went on. No syllable ever dropped from the loyal lips of the little one to dispel such an illusion. Whatever she might see, whatever she might hear, that grieved, or hurt, or amazed her youthful spirit during the hours spent in the gay saloons of her uncle's house, was her own secret, to be shared by nobody, and confided to nobody.

And to be sure she loved the dear ones who were her own and almost her only kindred, and clung to them with all the tenacity of a warm, passionate nature, which loves as naturally as a tendril clings. Had she been merely tolerated by her uncle, aunt, and cousins, Elma would still have yielded them a portion of her heart; but when, through the very force of her own ardour, she had awakened something like a responsive attachment—indeed, quite a creditable attachment for such languid, sluggish natures—within their bosoms, it was not to be wondered at that every Alfreton of them all was held to by her through thick and thin, their virtues magnified,

their charms dilated upon, and their shortcomings beheld in reverential silence. It said something for such a disposition that these last were neither excused nor overlooked. Elma, perceiving all, still loved. There was a touch of the Divine in this.

"But do be a little more careful," Lady Alfreton would murmur, more and more often, as time passed. "Do, Piers, recollect that at those sort of fifth-rate schools they work in all kinds of ideas into the children's minds. I would not have Elma think us a perfect set of heathens."

"What did I say to start that idea, ma'am? I was not more heathenish than usual, was I?"

"Did you not see the child's face when you talked of your river-party on Sunday?"

"Eh? Was that it? No, upon my word; I would not have mentioned it if I had known. She did not like the notion for Sunday, I suppose. By Jove! I thought all that sort of thing was exploded now-a-days. But Elma looked at me, did she? Well," slowly, "well, I'm sorry. If you had given me the hint, I would have stopped."

"And Juliet running on about that flirting Mrs. ——, I forget her name—that American woman! There, again, Elma sat with her eyes on her plate, and her cheeks quite pink. She is getting to understand now. She is sixteen, you know; and I fancy she understands a good deal more than she did. We really *must* take a little more heed of her," and the speaker moved uneasily in her chair.

"But she must learn to hear things said,' quoth Juliet, twirling her parasol with lazy grace. "It won't do for us all to hold our tongues whenever Elma is by."

"No—no. No, certainly, we must not feel the poor child to be in the way," replied her mother. "I am quite fond of Elma now, and would not for anything that she should come to seem in any way an intruder. Only we must educate her, and *that* we cannot do as long as she is only here once a week. As long as we cannot educate her we must"——

"Let her educate us," suggested Piers. "All right. You lead, Juliet, and I'll follow. You keep your thumb on American beauties and their

pastimes, and I'll maintain the silence of the grave about Sunday river-parties."

"She is growing very pretty, don't you think, mamma?" was Juliet's next.

"Sweet-looking, at least," replied Lady Alfreton, doubtfully, "hardly pretty. Hardly formed enough. In a few years' time"——

"She will have lost all the beauty she possesses," suddenly interposed her son, with a bluntness and decision of tone so unusual as to cause both his auditors to look round. "She will be like a hundred other girls of her age," he went on. "She will look as they do, talk as they do, hang about from morning to night as they do; daub her face, and screw up her hair, and stick out her elbows"——

"Piers!" Both mother's and daughter's voices cried "Fie!" upon him, in the solitary indignant word.

"Oh, it's all right," said he. "Of course I know. Of course they *don't* do some things, and they have *got* to do the other things; and Juliet could prove to me in a thousand ways that a thousand and one of her dear friends never

touch their hair, their eyes, or their pearl-coloured brows. Juliet never does so herself, except when it is absolutely necessary, and all the pretty girls in town would be quite shocked by such a suggestion. I know—I know," with a mocking wave of the hand. "Elma will be shocked too, by-and-by. And she will vow her waist is naturally only nineteen inches round (though we have all seen this nineteen inches gradually come, and though there is a fine, healthy development at present); and she will trim up the colour in her cheeks till there is none of the original left, or about as much as there was of the old material in the Irishman's coat; and she will frizz and burn her hair"——

"He is talking utter *nonsense*," cried Juliet, driven at last to bay. "Piers, you are too utterly absurd. You—you—what has made you break out like this? What do you mean by attacking us all like this? Because we do not wear frocks and sashes, and have our hair hanging down over our shoulders"——

"Heaven forbid!"

"Then what are you finding fault with?

What have we done—I, and the rest of my friends —that you should be so bitter, so violent?"

"It's true, you know."

"Even if it were true, why have you never said it before? Why have you always seemed pleased to meet the girls I bring here, and been civil to them, and"——

"My dear child, would you have had me uncivil? Would you have liked me to go up to your bosom friend and say, 'Take off that wig,' or, 'Wash your face'? I can do it next time, if you choose."

"I never knew you had an idea on the subject."

"Nor did I, till I was taught."

"Taught them, or taught that you had them?"

"Both."

"How did you learn?"

"Oh, I learnt."

"How? When?"

"I think I know," said another voice softly, unusually softly for Lady Alfreton; "at least I sometimes fancy that I feel something of the

same. I cannot tell how it is, but once or twice lately I have caught myself wishing Juliet's friends would not be *quite* so much—look *quite* so"—— she stopped.

"So what, mamma?"

"So different from Elma," said Piers, promptly. "But never mind, Juliet, cheer up; in a couple of years' time no one will make that complaint. Elma will be Elma no longer. One season in town, one three months of the life we lead, will do all that is required. She will have lost every trace of"——

But the door opened, and the sentence remained unfinished.

CHAPTER III.

"WE HAVE ONLY ONE THING IN COMMON."

WOULD it be as they all thought? Would the Elma of eighteen summers be another being, a disenchanted, disillusioned, practical, prosaic creature, as compared with the Elma of two years before? We shall see. At the earlier date my heroine was at any rate happy in her ignorance and innocence, and most happy of all in knowing her own bliss. Contrary to all precedent, and in defiance of every established rule, the young girl not only persisted in being well content under Miss Exeter's prim, old-fashioned rule, but in defending and maintaining her right to be so, and this in spite of her aunt's rueful visage, her cousin Juliet's sincere compassion, and the quizzings of her other cousin Piers.

She *was* happy—very happy—at Haverstock

Hill. Miss Exeter was kind and good, and spoke the truth. The girls were nice—most of them. They and she were very well treated, and were allowed to go to things—to concerts and lectures, and those kind of things—occasionally. There was always plenty to eat (reddening up at this) —always; as much as anybody wanted. Not exactly the same kind of food as she, Elma, got in Park Lane; not jellies and creams for dinner (Piers had been teasing his young cousin when her plate was filled for the second time, just before this), and she did like jellies and creams very much, and would have liked to have them every day, of course; but of course nobody ever did have them every day at schools. But when Miss Exeter gave the girls a late supper, which Miss Exeter did every now and then on birthdays and other occasions, Piers should only see what a supper it was! It would be the most *splendid* supper, and the whole table would be laid out *beautifully*, just as if a number of grand people were expected, instead of only the girls; for Miss Exeter always said that the girls were her guests at these

times, and that it was as her guests she treated them.

When pressed, Elma would indeed own that, on the other hand, during the long, hot, dusty summer months, the hours would go by rather slowly and languidly in the large, dull house, from whose windows no pretty flowering parks could be seen, by whose door gay carriages seldom passed, and at whose balcony the very organ-grinders would only look disconsolately, and pass on. There was not much to be done or seen outside, in their neighbourhood, she would be fain to confess; all the interest and excitement had to be kept for what went on within-doors; but then it was just that which made it so delightful, so very delightful, when her "Park Lane days" came, she would announce, smiling round upon everybody, "because it is always beautiful, and bright, and lovely here," she would add; and with the words would fall to work again upon her tempting plateful, with renewed zest of youthful appetite, and such a wonderful fresh innocence upon her face, that those who had begun by making merry

over her confessions, and glancing at one another in open, undisguised amusement at the simple prattle, would now sit mute a while, and regard the speaker with a strange feeling 'twixt tenderness and amazement. And withal there would be envy too.

"Always beautiful, and bright, and lovely," with them? How, then, came it that poor Lady Alfreton would spend whole hours in sighing weary sighs and breaking out into peevish, fretful ejaculations? How was it that Juliet would come dawdling into the breakfast-room too tired and too "headachy" to want any breakfast morning after morning, and be only aroused to anything like animation as the day went on, and brought with it some new stimulus, something to go to and talk about, something she had not done before? Juliet had now been through several London seasons, and had done many things before; but if she could get a novelty, be it the veriest trifle, she might still possibly awake for the moment. And yet she had been the first to pass the smile round at Elma's words.

Sir Thomas had been present once when the unconscious arrow had been shot, and he had smiled also. How little the poor young thing knew! he thought. How foolish children were! Ah, well! their time would come soon enough; and he too had turned to look upon his brother's orphan with something of a softened gaze.

Piers alone would have no glance of superiority, no gleam of merriment, in his eyes. They would rest on Elma's glowing countenance for a full minute or more after some such utterance; yet it were hard to say what they sought, or what they expected to find therein. He would never speak in answer: he would let some one else open the ball again.

The Alfretons had everything that this world can give. Few families could boast a more untarnished reputation, none a more smooth, unruffled domestic routine. Sir Thomas had no secret burden of care; his wife no gnawing, wearing ill-health; their children nothing to fret, nor thwart, nor oppress them. Piers, who was the elder, was treated in all respects as he would himself have said he ought to be,

At the time our little story opens he was somewhere between twenty and thirty years of age; he had done with Eton, and with Oxford, and with what seemed to him a long reach of time since then. He had seen pretty much all there was to be seen, and done all there was to be done in life, he would have told you. He had been all over the world, and come back again. He had tried a lot of things. He liked most things—passably. He had never met with anything that was worth liking more. He was fond of his own people—he supposed Nature had not gifted him with very keen feelings. Keen feelings were not in the family.

The outward appearance of the young man harmonised with, we had almost said emphasised, such sentiments. Piers was never in a hurry, never walked fast, never breathed hard, nor spoke eagerly, nor looked quickly. If he perceived his mother's coachman about to pass him in a crowd, and there was an empty seat within the carriage, and he knew he was welcome to that seat, it did not mean that because he could not be at the

trouble of signalling the attendants, and causing a halt, he did not incline towards the said seat. It was only that if nobody saw him he would go on his way, pursue his path; but that if seen and invited, he would assent to the proposal. He was not a luxurious man; he was not an effeminate man. On the contrary, his habits and tastes were of the simplest, and only the keenest observer would have detected that in such simplicity there was nothing of the freshness of youth, but that it rather partook of that sense of home-sickness with which the worn-out traveller, who has seen all that is rich and brilliant in his travels, turns his longing vision towards the childish scenes and primitive associations of his infancy.

"Piers can never be interested in anything," would be the complaint of both mother and sister, when themselves aroused, as we have said they could occasionally be, by some startling novelty or innovation.

"It is curious that a son of mine should not care for politics, I must say," Sir Thomas would add, with a raised eyebrow.

But it was not in his code, nor in the code of any one else, to take the son and heir to task.

Oh dear, no; Piers Alfreton was nobody's business, and had a right to please himself if any one had; and all Juliet desired, as she would herself declare, was that she should have the same immunity. As no one meddled with Piers, so must no one meddle with her. As Piers did not choose to exert himself, did not do anything, nor trouble with anything, why should she?

If mamma thought civilities were necessary from the one, why not from the other? If "duty visits" had to be made by the sister, why not by the brother? If Piers was an only son, she was an only daughter, and an only daughter was as good as an only son any day.

As for the difference in their ages, to be sure she was a few years the younger of the two; but what of that? She was old enough at any rate to be her own mistress; and when it came to this last assertion, Lady Alfreton, who had long been of the same opinion, would not press the point.

Yes, it was time Juliet married, if she meant

to marry. Juliet was not prettier, nor more elegant in shape, nor more *recherché* in dress, than were many others equally well-born and well-bred. Juliet ought to marry, and have a home and a position of her own; and if only her daughter could be brought to see the matter in this light, and to exert herself and be a little brighter, more amusing (men liked to be amused), more interested in things (no man would be likely to fancy an automaton), then the mother felt sure some happy event would justify the change. It was something of this desire, a desire which never seemed to be any nearer towards being fulfilled, that would from time to time overcloud the maternal brow, and cause the affectionate inquiry and commiseration from one who little dreamed what it meant. Elma thought that auntie was tired, or hot, or unwell; she never supposed for a moment that auntie was fretting.

Outwardly, as we have said above, all was the smoothest of the smooth in Park Lane. Outwardly, everything went on oiled wheels in that luxurious mansion. There never were scenes,

and explosions, and estrangements, as in other houses. Sir Thomas would come and go at his own hours, have his own appointments, and fulfil his own engagements. Lady Alfreton lunched, and drove, and dressed, and rested herself, and went out evening after evening, as she herself chose. Piers appeared and disappeared at intervals—no one knowing whence he came nor whither he went. Juliet had her own friends, and her own hours; and though now and again there would be an amalgamation of the forces, mother and daughter joining together, as it were, for the nonce, father and son even occasionally walking off in company, or dining with each other at their several clubs, the unison was spasmodic, the independence normal.

"I really think we have only one thing in common," exclaimed Juliet one day, "we get along together very well; we are what is called 'a united family;' we never quarrel, we never worry each other, nor meddle with each other—especially since I have got mamma to understand once for all that I am to be let alone as Piers is; we are always glad to see each other

at meals, and I drive with mamma two or three times a week in the season; but I do really think there is only one thing that we all have the same sort of feeling about. Such a funny thing, too. Who would ever have thought, when we first saw her, that any of us would have grown to care two straws about that queer little creature Elma?"

CHAPTER IV.

ELMA'S NEW FROCK.

SOME idea of the persons who formed Elma Alfreton's little world, betwixt the two hemispheres of which she hovered, having now been presented to our readers, let us proceed with our little history.

It was a warm, shining, quivering June day, when all London, all rich, glossy, gorgeous West End London, was in bloom, ablaze with colour and dazzling with sunbeams. The season was at its height. Night after night the carriages rolled to countless entertainments, day after day thousands thronged the parks, the gardens, and the tempting streets. Not a house in Park Lane was vacant.

"It is too hot to go out, and too hot to stay in,

and too hot to think about it!" Piers Alfreton lay back at ease in a low chair by the open window of his mother's boudoir, and tossed the tassel of the blind hither and thither by way of occupation. "Hullo!" as the door opened with a very different impetus from that which it was wont to receive. "Hullo! Here comes Elma! All on springs as usual. Well, young sage, how are you?" as she flew in. "Why, what a swell you are to-day! I say, we *are* a swell!" with his hands at the back of his head, and an air of profound admiration.

"It is my new frock," said Elma, blushing finely. "I knew you would notice it. Look, auntie. You said I needed another frock when I was here last Wednesday—this is it," and she looked from one to the other half in pride, half in timidity, but with a frank consciousness of having done the right thing that was pretty to see.

"So that is it, is it?" It was her cousin who again spoke, and as he did so Piers pulled himself to the front of the chair, and assumed a fresh attitude. "Let me see it all round, Elma.

Beau-ti-ful! 'Pon my word, I feel regularly taken aback."

"Oh, Piers." But Elma laughed, well pleased. "We were in such a fright, Miss Exeter and I," she proceeded confidentially, "that it would never be ready in time. Miss Exeter was so kind about it. She went about it herself. It only came in an hour ago from the dressmaker's, and as Miss Exeter said, whatever should we have done if there had been anything to alter, when there was no time to alter it in? But it was all right; and we thought auntie would be pleased. It was to be a surprise for her. We—but don't you like it, auntie?"

Poor Lady Alfreton! Not only had she to meet the sudden wistfulness of eyes that had beamed half a minute before, but another glance fell upon her, and that one so quick and fierce that her heart jumped beneath its most explicit language.

Like it? She would have liked anything at the moment.

"Oh yes, my dear—yes," she stammered

hastily. "Yes, indeed—very much—very pretty." ("Ridiculous of Piers! As if *he* could know!" internally.) "Very pretty and nice, I am sure," murmured she aloud, and wondered what more was expected of her.

"You said you liked white," responded Elma, with renewed satisfaction; "so Miss Exeter said at once that it should be white. I have never had a perfectly white frock for the morning before."

"Poor child!" Then Lady Alfreton put up her eyeglass, and felt as if she really *must* speak. "I think, my dear, I think—ahem—Elma, that there is one thing—is not the skirt a little long, just a little too long, for a girl of your age?" ("Looks like a charity-school child," *sotto voce.*) "A little too long, and"——

"Miss Exeter thought it would be sure to shrink in the washing, auntie. And besides that, you see I have really not done growing yet," and Elma peeped shyly from under her long lashes to see whether Piers would laugh at the confession. "I grew so much this last year that there had to be false hems put upon all my

frocks, and we thought it would be better to have this one made rather long at the first. You don't mind, do you, auntie?"

Again Lady Alfreton felt that she dared not mind. Her son was merely sitting by; he had not shot her another peremptory signal, and he had not spoken to his cousin again, but she knew by instinct of what she had to beware. In consequence, she nervously plied her eye-glass.

"To be sure, my love; yes—ye—es, to be sure; but still——. Oh, it is very nice, I am sure"——

"You see, auntie, if I had had the skirt made *quite* the right length, it might have got to be of no use to me at all by next summer."

"Next summer!" The soft ejaculation was but just caught by the other two.

"Why, of course, it will still be my best next summer, auntie. Oh, I don't expect to have a new one like this every year. You see it is a very good *expensive* white material, Miss Exeter says. Look at it, auntie,'

advancing with a piece between finger and thumb.

"Let me feel, too, Elma," said Piers.

"And it will wash and wash for ever," continued Elma, when each had had their turn. "Wash and wash for ever, and"——

The eyeglass fell from her aunt's hand.

"—And do up again as good as new." There was no more to be said; and having thus vindicated her purchase from all suspicion of having given rise to reckless expenditure, the youthful speaker complacently seated herself on the extreme edge of a chair, and carefully drew out the folds of the precious frock on either side.

A newcomer entered. "Oh, here is Elma; and how cool you do look, child," said Juliet, dropping into the nearest seat. "Oh dear, what it is to get indoors! I really could not have stopped outside another minute. And oh, this riding habit," tearing it open at the throat. "A riding habit on a day like this! Don't kiss me, Elma—we'll take that for granted to-day."

"Do you like my new frock, Juliet?"

"There is the luncheon gong, Juliet, Elma," a somewhat hasty interposition from Lady Alfreton. "Juliet, you will go down as you are! But Elma likes to run upstairs and brush her hair."

"And steal the eau-de-cologne!" and Elma was off like the wind. That little dressing and brushing and combing in her aunt's dainty bedroom before luncheon was always in itself a treat. The plunging of her dimpled hands into the nice hot water poured ready in the large basins (the basins themselves, and indeed the whole washstand, were Elma's admiration), the frothing them over with the milky almond-soap, so unlike the rough little brown cakes in use at Miss Exeter's, the drying on the smooth, soft, fine towels—all of this was delicious, and no whit of the deliciousness was lost on one who by nature loved luxury.

Then came the standing in front of the large, clear mirror, in which Elma could behold herself from top to toe, and wherein it appeared to her that she somehow invariably looked taller, and

nicer in every way, than she did elsewhere. The ivory brushes and combs on the well-furnished toilet-table would be put into requisition without delay, a pin extracted from the elegant lace pin-cushion—a long one with a black head was Elma's fancy, and her aunt had repeatedly bidden her take what she liked and use what she liked, so a black-headed pin was sure to fasten any stray ribbon or end of collarette that required to be caught; and next, and lastly, there would be the crowning glory of the important business, in the saturating of her clean, and so far unfolded pocket-handkerchief—always one of her best handkerchiefs, and never opened out before this moment—there would be the soaking it through and through with eau-de-cologne from the great cut-glass bottle which stood up like a monarch, overtopping all the other bottles by which it was surrounded in front of the looking-glass.

Elma had worked a pretty mat for this bottle It had seemed to her as if she must do something even for an inanimate object which gave her so much pleasure—and she noted

that the mat was always there. Indeed, neither mistress nor maid would have removed it for the world.

But a frock was different. What the fashion, or even the colouring of a toilet-mat might be, signified nothing, or nearly nothing. Elma had not particularly good taste, and her crewels were a little too gay in shade, if the truth must be told; but Lady Alfreton had only smiled at this, smiled kindly and tenderly, and thanked the donor with a kiss of real gratitude.

"If only Elma had confined herself to mats!" she now thought.

"O Juliet," she cried, as soon as the family trio were alone. "O Juliet, that poor, dear little thing! I do call it cruel, wicked of that schoolmistress of hers to make of her such an absolute fright! I really do not know what to say about it."

"It did look rather awful, certainly," and Juliet paused.

"You thought so too?" said Piers suddenly. "Well, it is a queer thing, but it seemed to me I never saw Elma look prettier."

"Elma herself—yes," his mother agreed. "Elma looked pretty enough; she always does now, I think." It was characteristic of the speaker that she could change her opinion as readily as her robe, and since we last beheld her Lady Alfreton had effected this change in her mental attitude towards her niece's appearance. "But, my dear Piers," cried she, with all the pent-up energy of repressed denunciations at length let loose, "my dear Piers, I think I never saw such a frock! I cannot imagine who they could have got to make it for her!"

"What was the matter with it?"

"Everything was the matter—everything. Even you could see that it had no style, no fit; that it pulled at the neck, and hung down at the back; that it was too long, and too loose"——

"By Jove! ma'am, I saw nothing of the kind. What I did see was that Elma looked uncommonly nice, and cool, and smart"——

"Not smart, no, not smart, Piers. No. That was just what she did *not* look. Excuse my

contradicting you, but if there is one thing I do know a little about, it is how to dress. The frock was very *well*, comfortable, I suppose, and —and clean; and cool, as you say; but if you talk of its being smart"——

He shrugged his shoulders.

"You ought to have seen to it yourself, mamma," was Juliet's next.

"I ought. You are right. That is the only thing now to be done." Lady Alfreton paused, and then in a tone befitting the importance of the occasion, gave to the world the decision she had arrived at. "And I *will*. I will never again risk such an exhibition. Elma may do as she pleases and be as she pleases while she is at Haverstock Hill, but when she comes to Park Lane she must appear as our niece, and as we choose. For to-day Marie must run up a tuck somewhere out of sight in that frightful skirt, and I must try not to see the dragging collar. But the next new clothes she needs I shall provide, and they shall be such as I approve. So now—— Come in, Elma, love; we have not waited

you see. Oh, dear me! what a great, hot luncheon"——

"And I am *so* hungry for it!" And Elma not chancing to look round, did not perceive that any one smiled.

CHAPTER V.

LADY ALFRETON PROPOSES A TREAT.

"THERE is a flower show at the Botanic Gardens this afternoon," said Lady Alfreton presently. "I met the Duchess of Mertoun this morning, and she told me of it, and said she was going. Going to take her youngest daughter, she said. I thought of you, Elma, and said we should be there also."

"Oh, auntie!" Elma's lips parted.

"I knew it would be just the thing for you," continued her aunt, kindly. "Girls always like flower shows."

"Oh yes, and"——

"And it is the coolest kind of entertainment one can think of in such weather. The flowers ought to be particularly good this season, it has been such a dry one. I think we shall enjoy it, Elma."

"I am *sure* we shall. Oh, auntie, if you only knew! It is *the* thing, the very thing I had set my heart on going to. Just fancy! I had actually been going to ask you to take me. You are so very, very kind about taking me to places," continued Elma apologetically, "that I thought I might at least tell you there *was* a flower show, and then if you *did* just like to go"——

"There would be nothing to hinder me," said Lady Alfreton, laughing. "Very well; that is settled, then. Our two ideas have jumped in common, and we are certainly bound to carry them out. Have you ever met Lady Mabel Pomeroy? She is somewhere about your own age, I fancy."

"Is she? And is she nice, auntie?"

"You must find out that for yourself." Lady Alfreton laughed again. "I shall introduce you. After what the duchess said, I feel that she quite intended me to do so, and then you two girls can walk about together. She will be a nice friend for you, Elma, I dare say; and if you make a good impression, no doubt you will get invited there."

"Ye—es, thank you; but," submitted Elma, a little doubtfully, "but even if I am, when could I go? I never do go anywhere, you know—never anywhere but here."

"Oh, we should see about that," responded her aunt, with a cheerful nod. "You shall not be prevented going, if the duchess asks you, I promise. The duchess is devoted to this youngest daughter, who is very much younger than any of the rest of her family, and whatever Mabel wishes to do her mother does. I have only seen Mabel once or twice, and I confess I—I hardly noticed her at all. I have an impression that she was not particularly pretty or attractive—but I may have been wrong By the way, Elma, love, before we go out, there is one little thing I should like Marie to alter in that frock. Do not let me forget. As we do not go out till four, there will be plenty of time."

Elma promised, but in the promise there was a certain absence of mind which nobody perceived. She was thinking of something else, and of something which made even the matter

of the new frock one of secondary importance.

To let our readers into her little secret, there was a good deal more than appeared in the jubilant response with which Lady Alfreton's suggestion of going to the flower show had been met. Some time previously Elma had been taken to a *fête* of the same kind by her indulgent relation, and her account of the same—of the beauty of the gardens and flowers, of the delightful music, of the crowds of gay company and fine dresses, above all, of the little *al fresco* tea-party which Lady Alfreton had held under the trees, asking several of her friends to join their party, and ordering up all kinds of nice things, sweets and ices, as well as tea and coffee—all of this had been hearkened to with enthusiasm and envy on the part of Elma's audience afterwards.

It had sounded like an enchanted scene in the ears of the poor girls, some of whom had had but a dull holiday, and none of whom had at any rate attained to anything so grand or so gay.

Elma had been called upon to narrate and dilate over and over again. She had dwelt upon the sunshine, the sprightliness, the numberless little tables set out in the cool shade, the coming and going of the brisk waiters, the babble of endless tongues, and the soft yet inspiring strains of the distant band, playing their best under the leadership of the far-famed Godfrey, until, from merely listening and questioning, the whole had become such a real, living wonderland to the rest, that the possibility of such another scene ever being again enacted within just bounds of Miss Exeter's domain had set them cogitating and projecting in a manner that presently wrought its own results.

Elma did not tell them, did not indeed know herself, that much of the charm of that delightful summer afternoon had lain in something too subtle and intangible to be taken hold of, that she might have gone to a thousand festivals and known nothing of it, that it was the compound of exquisite weather, fascinating company, novelty, and innumerable other under-

currents, which had gone to form the delicious draught.

An ill-attended, discouraged festivity, struggled through beneath doubtful skies, and as a member of an uncomfortable party of persons who know neither where to go nor what to do, and who have only here and there a stray acquaintance to speak to—what can be more dreary?

Now, the Alfretons were emphatically what is called the "right sort" of people in society.

Whatever they might feel, they might be depended upon never to show themselves openly bored, nor disappointed. They never were astray, never at a loss. If an affair threatened to be stupid or tiresome, Lady Alfreton and her daughter were off. If the contrary, they were in their element; stimulated for the time being, into two bright, smiling, responsive women, with whom every one liked to be seen, and who speedily gathered round them plenty of smart-looking folks of their own order.

If Lady Alfreton made a proposition or a suggestion it was sure to be assented to. If

she threw the handkerchief, as it were, to anybody, the handkerchief would be eagerly caught. So that it was not only in the eyes of the unsophisticated Elma that it seemed as though wherever their party moved, or sat, there was the centre, or at any rate one centre, of every throng.

To go with them, or be with them in public, was an altogether different thing to going or being with many others, more estimable perchance, but less possessed than they of that wondrous, inexplicable *savoir faire* which means so much.

This digression will serve to explain the mistake into which my heroine and her schoolfellows presently fell.

The excitement and yearning desires caused by Elma's first flower-show had scarcely begun to subside, ere they were stirred into fresh action by the announcement—goodness knows how the simple creatures came to see it or hear of it!—of another and an equally prominent one, to be given in the rival gardens.

Why should they not now, one and all, see for

themselves and hear for themselves if such things as had been told them by the fortunate and envied Elma were true?

Why should they not in their turn be partakers of the delights which had, even in the recital, made such havoc in their bosoms?

If Miss Exeter could be prevailed upon to take them! Miss Exeter, although a rigid little martinet as regarded rules and hours, and simply unapproachable on the subject of lessons, was by no means insensible to overtures made at proper times and in a proper spirit.

More than one undertook to sound her on the present occasion, and recollections of past indulgence, and whispers such as "Oh, she was a regular old dear about *that*, don't you know?" passed from lip to lip as the idea ripened.

Then, of course, Elma would also be at the show. How lucky that it had been fixed for a Wednesday, when the weekly half-holiday came round, and when Elma was off at Park Lane, secure of all that was good! No one exactly said, but by-and-by it came to be tacitly under-

stood, that Elma's being under Lady Alfreton's wing, if the affair came off, would bear its own fruits for all.

"She is such a good-natured little thing," declared Henrietta Grey, the leader of the conspiracy, "she is sure to manage it somehow."

"It" referring to certain advantages, and one advantage in particular, which it was devoutly hoped might accrue to the school party from the presence of Elma's people.

"Oh yes, Elma will manage it," assented another.

And "Elma will manage it," chimed in one and all with like confidence.

Elma's own heart echoed the conviction. Her aunt had been so invariably indulgent and easy-going, not only towards herself, but towards the world generally when in the presence of her niece, that she told herself she had no fear but what her kind relation would now simply do as she was bid.

And at first it actually seemed as though Lady Alfreton were to outstep this, and divine by instinct what was required of her.

Here was she proposing the very arrangement which lay at Elma's heart! Here had she too seen the announcement of the floral *fête*, and had thought of it for herself and by herself! Thought of it, moreover, in regard to her niece, and with a view to her pleasure!

It was too much; it opened the doors as if by magic; it showed her the ball as it were at her feet.

About the duchess and the duchess's daughter Elma cared little. If this Mabel were a nice girl, well and good—she would be willing to take her in tow, and let her join the party, and be one of them; but if not, she would be just little in the way. Of course, Elma would be civil to her, Elma always was civil to her aunt's guests ("She has such a *sweet* manner!" Lady Alfreton would now and then exclaim, with something like genuine enthusiasm); but Lady Alfreton would be sure to understand, reflected the simple girl, that no stranger could be the same to her as were her own friends, and that if Henrietta, and Maggie, and all of them had come depending on her, she *must* give them the most of her attention.

"Miss Exeter and the girls are going too," she now confided, pouring the cream over gooseberry tart and custard pudding; "Miss Exeter is going to take six of the girls."

Lady Alfreton almost started.

CHAPTER VI.

ON THE WAY TO THE FÊTE.

"WHICH will be our best way to go?" said Miss Exeter, half in cogitation, half of the expectant audience around her. "Of course an omnibus would take us straight to the door, but it really is no very great distance to walk. The 'Underground' would not help us at all. So it lies between walking and an omnibus. What do you think, girls? Would any of you be overtired if we were to walk?"—— and she paused for opinions and votes.

"Oh, do let us walk, Miss Exeter," pleaded a voice on the instant. "One does get so crushed in an omnibus. And every omnibus is sure to be full," continued the speaker, glancing anxiously at her newly-starched and crimped muslin, kept

sacred for the occasion. "We should have to squeeze in just as we could find places"——

"Which would break up our party. You are right, Henrietta; we must not run the risk of being separated. Well then, girls, we must walk a little briskly, that is all. And take care that we keep to the shady sides of the roads. There is shade on one side nearly all the way, I fancy. We had better be off now, if we are all here. Are we all here?"

All were there, and all were turned out in their holiday attire, each in the style affected by herself.

"Dear, happy young faces," murmured the kind-hearted preceptress, as she looked around her; "we only need Elma to complete the group. But no doubt we shall soon have Elma also among us, and she will be pleased to present her young companions to her aunt. I must say I look forward to meeting Lady Alfreton, of whom I have heard so much. I trust she may be persuaded to be there to-day. Elma seemed quite confident—but of course Elma could not *know*. It will not do to build too much on the chance;

still"—and up flew the good lady's best black lace parasol with a brisk, energetic twitch, and off pattered her two little neat, buttoned-up feet after the file in front, whilst neither the blazing sun overhead, nor the scorching pavements underfoot, caused a twinge of regret for having embarked upon a long and fatiguing afternoon's pleasure. Work was work, and holiday was holiday, at Miss Exeter's school.

And to be sure, going to the great midsummer flower-show was something of a new departure for both mistress and girls.

Hitherto, as has been said, concerts, picture galleries, and exhibitions—some species of entertainment which should carry with it a substratum of instruction—had been very properly the order of the day. Flower-shows were charming and delightful, but—it had ended, however, in Miss Exeter's yielding the point, as we know, and finally in her becoming quite as much excited over the prospect as any of her young charges.

To meet Lady Alfreton! To be spoken to by, perhaps allowed to sit beside or walk beside, that elegant, accomplished gentlewoman! To hear

Elma's praises, and have an opportunity of sounding the same note in return!

She had often longed to be able to say a little word about her dear Elma, to tell Elma's aunt what a good, unselfish, sweet-tempered child she was—nay, more, how high-principled and conscientious. The first attributes it was to be supposed indeed that her ladyship might of herself have discovered, but she could not know as Miss Exeter knew, at what measure to rate her niece in qualities more enduring.

Hitherto there had been no opening for such a conversation, no opportunity for hearing Lady Alfreton's own views on the subject. From Elma indeed it could be gathered that kindness—more than kindness, unbounded indulgence—was shown her by one and all in Park Lane, but further than this she could not be expected to relate. In some ways, moreover, Elma would exhibit a reticence which Miss Exeter respected regarding her relations. She never told, for instance, when there had been any occasion for complaining of her "Miss Exeter face," or for calling her "a sage." It was not, she felt, Miss Exeter's busi-

ness, nor any one's business, to know of these scenes. They were her own, and she hid them deep down in her young heart.

But to Miss Exeter, and to all under Miss Exeter's roof, her aunt would be beautiful, graceful, faultless in manner and in dress; Juliet would be pretty and pleasant, and merry and kind; Piers would be "my cousin Piers," tall, dark, very kind too, but not so merry, rather a tease, but very kind too, rather lazy and tiresome sometimes, but always very kind—none of them, in short, knew quite what to make of this cousin Piers. Of her uncle, Elma had very little to relate. Of course Sir Thomas was "kind"—every one in Park Lane was "kind;" but as she would cheerfully have said the same of the page boy or the scullery maid, it could hardly be felt that much information had been gained, and Sir Thomas quickly passed out of view into a dim background of his own mansion.

On the other hand, the "I must say I do wish to see Lady Alfreton," the ejaculation of the tall Henrietta Grey above alluded to, had found an echo in every bosom.

Now Elma knew this, and Elma in the depths of her own heart had her own little plan.

The morning of the important day had dawned, as we know, melting in warmth and sunlight, and by one o'clock the privileged pupil had departed, full charged with excitement and importance, and feeling not a little as though the whole success or failure of the afternoon's campaign rested upon her own shoulders. Her aunt's victoria had come for her, and off she had been comfortably whirled in it, several half-envious but wholly affectionate glances being cast on the same from behind down-drawn blinds; but Elma told herself gleefully that the same eyes would behold her far more sumptuously equipped presently. Lady Alfreton's barouche was high and shallow, and swung on the easiest of cee-springs. To drive in it was Elysium, and as such the afternoon in the Park, or elsewhere, had often been described. She had impressed on all over and over again that it was of no use to go early, that her aunt was never early; she had tried as nearly as ever she could to hit off the time, so that the two arrivals

might coincide—but this she was at length fain to own was beyond the power of human ken. What she hoped for was that the little band might walk up just as the barouche was halting before the entrance gate, and her aunt's solemn, powdered footman letting down the step. Then would she nod and wave her hand.

Then would her aunt inquire at once who were Elma's friends? Would she take notice of them individually? Ask their names? Very likely. Lady Alfreton was always so nice to the young folks who came with their parents to see her.

But the great point at issue was of course about Miss Exeter. About Miss Exeter Elma was just a little anxious. She was not a remarkably quick observer. She was not on the lookout, as some children and young people are, to pick up whatever their eyes can see or their ears hear, but still she had a kind of vague, dim, general idea that her aunt needed yet to appreciate Miss Exeter.

What if now she were to have a chance of beginning to do so? And if she had, and if she

did, and if after shaking hands with Miss Exeter, and passing a few remarks, Lady Alfreton were to invite her niece's governess to walk a little about the grounds with her, how pleased Miss Exeter would be! All the party would be pleased, all would feel the honour and be elevated by it; and so "Of course Aunt Selina will," concluded the young sage internally, "if Aunt Selina only knows they will be pleased—that is all."

Very upright she sat by and by as the moment of moments approached. All had gone bravely so far. Her frock had had the ordained tuck run in by her aunt's maid, and Marie had furthermore improved the misfit in the neck. Elma had put on her pair of nice new kid gloves, kept till then, and had had her fleece of golden hair combed out afresh, and now sat perfectly radiant in what was recognised as her own seat in the barouche, opposite the other ladies.

Lady Alfreton had also on a pretty new dress and bonnet, and she and Juliet, as well as Elma herself. had been provided with sweet-scented

gardenias for their buttonholes. Piers had done this. He had gone out after luncheon, and returned with one for each; and Elma fancied that hers was the finest and sweetest of the three. She really *had* nothing left to wish for after this.

As the carriage entered the Regent's Park many others were passed which she guessed were bound on a like errand. She was not such a novice in London ways by this time as to be at all surprised by finding their own horses obliged to stop when yet a great way off from the entrance to the gardens, and the stoppage was the culminating point to expectancy and excitement.

"A tremendously long line in front, auntie," she announced, peering round joyfully. "And such a number of empty carriages under the trees opposite. Oh, the band has begun—I hear it from in there—from over the wall. Oh, what a pity we did not come sooner. But never mind, I dare say it has not been playing long. I wonder," meditatively, "I wonder if the girls have arrived."

Her aunt and cousin exchanged glances.

"We shall be a long time before we get in," continued Elma, after a pause, and then another peep round. "We do get on so slowly. I never can make out why people cannot jump out a little more quickly, when they *know* there are so many waiting behind. I am sure I always jump out like the wind."

"That you do, Elma."

"But I was standing near a door one day, looking on at the carriages driving up for a wedding"——

"Elma!"

"Oh yes, auntie, it was a very nice wedding, quite in a nice part, and there were only a few people looking on, quite nice people; so Miss Mordern, it was she who was with us that day, said we might stop a minute and look on too; so we did, and saw ever so many people get out."

"Well?" Lady Alfreton would fain not have been diverted and interested, but somehow it was Elma who spoke. "Well, what did you see?"

"Oh, the people were such *clogs!* They just *trailed* out, one after another, ever so slowly. And when they got on to the carpet—there was a red carpet—they stood and spoke to each other over their shoulders and made believe to take out their handkerchiefs, and arrange their buttonholes—and everything. We didn't mind, we liked to watch them; but I should have been angry if I had been in the carriages behind."

Her hearers laughed.

"You will know Miss Exeter when you see her, auntie?"

"I—I dare say, my dear."

"She has little grey curls, you know, frizzy curls; and she always wears black; and—but of course I can tell you if I see her first, and I am likely to see her first, as I know her best. And then of course there are the girls. There are six—Henrietta, Maggie"——

"Yes, love, yes. Now then, Elma"——

"Two will be in pink, and"——

"Now Elma, now; here we are. Let us see how you 'jump out like the wind' now. [Aside

to Juliet] Quick, quick, and we may escape the school after all." And with the words, the elegant and usually languid Lady Alfreton actually whisked her young charges through the entrance gate, catching the lace of her scarf as she did so, and sped up the broad path like a steam-engine. So far, there was no Miss Exeter to be seen.

CHAPTER VII.

THE DUCHESS OF MERTOUN AND HER DAUGHTER.

ND so you have actually another charming young daughter, Lady Alfreton? And this is the one you told me you were going to bring to-day? Not out yet, of course, is she?"

"Only sixteen, Duchess. And Elma is not my daughter—not *quite* my daughter," and the speaker bestowed an affectionate smile on the blushing girl by her side, "though very like it, Elma—eh, Elma?"—Then aside to the new-comer—"Poor Henry's child, you know. Sir Thomas's younger brother. The only child he had. Both parents dead. A sweet girl."

Lady Alfreton spoke with warmth and sincerity, and the impression was immediate.

"Really?" replied the Duchess of Mertoun,

who, it will be remembered, was to be at the flower-show to which all our *dramatis personæ* had severally wended their way, and who, as luck would have it, was the very first person to accost Elma's aunt as she paused to take breath and recover herself after her hasty flight from the perils of the entrance-gate, "really? I remember Henry Alfreton perfectly. We were dancing partners in the old days. To be sure, yes; the duke told me he had heard of poor Henry's death, but I did not know he had been married. And so this is his daughter," turning again to Elma, who was shyly waiting to be taken notice of. "Let her walk with Mabel. Mabel—where is Mabel? Oh, come here, Mabel, here is a young friend for you to walk with. Just of an age, are you not? Is Mabel older? Very little, then. I have brought Mabel here," turning to Lady Alfreton, "because it is such a pretty sight; and her French governess"——

"Is off for the afternoon, thank goodness!" And Mabel, a brisk, healthful damsel, with the saucy air of a spoilt child, interrupted her mother unhesitatingly. "So is yours, I

suppose?" to Elma, as the two turned away together. "What is her name? What do you call her? You don't call her by her real name, do you? What," stopping short with a start and a stare, "what? What did you say? You are at school? *At school?* Why, I—I never met any one who was at school before. Is it fun? Is it jolly? Do you have good times? Oh, do tell me about it. What ever made you go to school? I wish mamma would send me. How I should enjoy it, and what a dance I would lead them! I lead them a dance at home, I can tell you. Now, begin at the very beginning, and tell me every single thing you do, and what the other girls do, and what they are like, and all about it. I wonder if mamma knows you go. Perhaps if she did, she would send me. But what ever made your mamma send you? Did you yourself ask her? Did you"——

"I have no mamma now," said Elma softly.

"No mamma! I—I beg your pardon, I am sure, but—but is not Lady Alfreton your mamma?"

"No, she's my aunt."

"Your aunt, oh—o—oh, oh," proceeded Mabel, appreciating the situation in a long breath, "of course I understand it, then. You have to be *somewhere*, and so you are at school. But you see I didn't know: I hope you are not angry. They say at home that it is no use being angry with me. They say my tongue runs on like running water, and that it is no use trying to stop me. If you had only stopped me"——

"But you say it is no use."

"Neither it is. Ah, you are a funny girl, I see. I suppose you are clever, and all that. I am not. I don't generally like clever girls, either, but I like you. And you will tell me all about the school, won't you? What's your name? Elma? *Elma?* That is a droll name, to be sure. I don't generally like droll names, but I like yours. I say, Elma, do look at that bonnet; did you ever see such a bonnet? The bonnets are gone crazy this year, I think. My governess has got the craziest of them all; but she thinks it is vastly becoming. There is a cloak just like mamma's. I must tell mamma.

No, I won't, because it was I who made her choose that cloak, so she shan't have a chance now to turn on me and say it is common. Do you like hats turning up at the side? I don't: I think they *are* common, and I would not have one, though Fanchette—that's our maid—tried hard to make me. There is a French girl, I am sure: she is just like Fanchette—just. She waddles along exactly as Fanchette does. I must tell mamma. No, I won't; for mamma does not like Fanchette as it is, so she shan't have a chance to laugh at her. I think it's ill-natured to laugh at people, don't you? Well, if I had a great pair of awkward feet like those, I should know better than to pinch them up into those little pointed shoes. They are *rather* nice shoes, if only—oh, I don't know. I don't think I care for them. My own are nicer. Let me see yours. Oh, well, yours are—are hardly—but I suppose that is because you are at school. Is that why your frock is rather funny too? Do the other girls wear frocks like that? It is an awfully pretty frock, you know—only, only I never saw one quite like it before. It's because

you are at school, of course. Have you any sisters? Or brothers? Neither? Nobody? I have seven. Three brothers and three sisters. All older than me. That's why they make out that mamma spoils me. I don't mind. They can't help her spoiling me, and they had better not try. Do you like elder brothers and sisters? Oh, you haven't got any. But this cousin of yours, what is her name—do you like her?"

And at last, and from sheer want of breath, the speaker paused for a reply.

She received none; Elma's eyes and ears were elsewhere.

"Oh, you are not listening to me," said Lady Mabel, shortly.

That she should not be chidden, remonstrated with, laughed at, called to order, but withal accorded notice and attention was a new thing. Who was this girl, this niece of Lady Alfreton's, who wore such an odd frock and such dreadful shoes, and who was only *rather* pretty and nice, and perhaps not clever after all, that she should be looking about her and thinking of other things, when she, Mabel, was doing her best to

make friends? Mabel drew herself up. To do her justice, she was not an arrogant miss, nor an ill-natured one. She was simply a talker, and a talker who required but the shallowest pretext of being given audience to; therefore she had undoubtedly grounds for a little colour in the cheek.

"Please excuse me," said Elma very gently. "It was only that I was watching for—for some friends; for some people who may want me, and if they miss me"——

"Oh, all right, I understand. But you won't find them. People never do find each other in these sort of places. You had better stop with me—stop at any rate till we meet the others"——

"Oh yes," eagerly.

"You see my mother said we were to walk together;" and it did not escape Elma that "my mother" was substituted for "mamma."

"I like to walk with you—I do *indeed*," cried she, almost in an agony of repentance for the unintentional rudeness, which was not only foreign to her own nature, but the least

hint of which would have cost her aunt infinite chagrin; "please, Mabel, *please* understand that I was enjoying myself so very much with you, that it was only because I could not forget that I had promised to watch for the girls"——

"The girls? What girls?"

"The girls at Miss Exeter's school."

"The school-girls! Oh, I say!"

"Miss Exeter is bringing them here to-day, and I said I should keep a look out, and be ready to speak to them, and tell them what to see, and where to go"——

"Oh, I say! What fun! Why didn't you tell me before, you stupid dear? Why, I would have helped you to hunt, and we should have found them ages ago. Oh, I *should* like to see the girls. Oh, I am not a bit cross with you now, Elma; I dare say I bored you to death. Only you see, you should have stopped me. If I had only known! Come along now; mamma and Lady Alfreton are close behind—there they are—can't you see your aunt's green parasol? Isn't it a pretty parasol? Mamma

says Lady Alfreton is always well dressed. She will dress you when you are grown up, won't she? It doesn't matter so long as you are at school, you know: but of course Lady Alfreton will take care what you wear when you go to live with her. I suppose you will go to live with her when you are grown up, won't you?"

Go to live with her aunt? Strange to say, this idea was now for the first time presented to Elma's mind. Not a syllable of it had ever been spoken in her hearing, either by her relations on the one hand or Miss Exeter on the other, and the sensation to which the light remark of her thoughtless companion gave rise within her bosom was such as for a few moments to preclude every other thought.

At first, and as was natural, it was with an emotion approaching rapture that she admitted to herself that Mabel might but have alluded to the simple and certain sequence to her present life. It might be so taken for granted in the household of Sir Thomas that she would presently become a member of it, that it had only been

her own dulness which had not perceived as much. Certainly no one had ever said so—but there are things which go without saying. Then if so—if so—and Elma's heart beat high. Oh, what happiness! Oh, what endless delights! Oh, how much she might do for others! What days for the girls! What complacency for Miss Exeter! What merry-makings! What——

"You are not listening to me again!" But Lady Mabel was laughing this time. "You are the funniest girl in the world," continued she good-humouredly. "You go off into *thinks* while we are talking. I wonder what you think about. I never think—I don't know how. And I have no time, any way. When I am with my governess, it is lessons, lessons, lessons, from morning till night; then, when I get away with mamma, or some one else, I want to talk and have a good time. You like a good time too; I can see it in your face. I like you, though you do go off into *thinks*. I say, Elma, I wish we went to every place together, and could walk about like this. It is much better fun going with you than with mamma. O Elma! there

is a pretty frock; that is just the sort of frock I should have liked for myself. I wish I had had it instead of this," discontentedly.

"Why, I think yours is perfectly beautiful."

"No? Do you? Did you think so at the first, or only now?"

"Oh, at the first—from the very first minute. I liked mine, till—till I saw yours, Mabel," said Elma gently.

"Do you? Well, you know, yours is—is very pretty, but it is just a little—it is not quite—did Lady Alfreton order it for you?" demanded Mabel abruptly.

"No. Miss Exeter did; and I do not think—I am almost sure my aunt did not quite like it. I saw her look from mine to yours," and poor Elma swallowed something in her throat. She had at last interpreted aright the dubiousness on her aunt's brow on the subject.

"Oh no, I am sure you did not," cried Mabel, however; "oh, it was not that, I am sure," with all the animation of vanity gratified; "and you are a very good-natured girl, Elma, to say so if it were," illogically. "Mamma thinks you

pretty, any way," she added, eager to make up, "she told me so. She said I was to meet Lady Alfreton's pretty daughter this afternoon. That was you. We don't think Miss Alfreton pretty *now*—do you? She used to be pretty five or six years ago, but—as she is only your cousin, you won't mind—we think her gone off. Now, Elma, where are those girls of yours? Let us look for them. And here is the frock—*my* frock—again. Oh, it is prettier, a great deal prettier than mine. Come and let us look a little closer. Let us examine it, and see if Fanchette could not run me up one something the same. I want another new frock; I am sure I do. My sisters will say I don't, but I can get round mamma. Oh, I see how it is made, and Fanchette could easily make me one—easily. Come a little nearer. Oh, how tiresome those people are, keeping moving and moving, and that little frump of a woman getting in between us! Now all that line of frightful-looking girls must follow, I suppose. Tiresome creatures! As if any one wanted to see *them!* Not a frock among them! And *jackets*, Elma, *jackets*, on

a day like this! Why, Elma"—— and Lady Mabel's tongue not only stopped as if it had been stung, but clove to the roof of her mouth.

Another voice had interposed—

"Found at last! We have been all over the gardens looking for you. O Elma! where have you been?"

CHAPTER VIII.

"*I NEVER KNEW ANY ENCOUNTER MORE* MAL-A-PROPOS."

COULD it be Miss Exeter who spoke? Could it be Henrietta, and Maggie, and all the rest of the merry band from whom she had parted only a few hours before, who now accosted Elma? What—what had they been doing to themselves? Why—why did they look like that? Was that really Henrietta's pretty blue hat and veil, which had erewhile seemed so dainty and *chic* to Elma's vision? Was that Margaret's best muslin skirt, and Georgina's new scarf?

Elma's eyes grew round with astonishment; she could scarce credit they were not playing her some trick.

Miss Exeter, too, dear little Miss Exeter, why had she made herself look so?—why had she put

on that everlasting black-beaded mantilla, which never had bunched out properly behind, and which looked almost brown in the dazzling sunlight of this June day?

One and all they might have done better, they might have exerted themselves to look better on such an occasion. They might have—but here the discomfited soliloquist stopped short, with a strange novel truth dawning on her reluctant mind, and the momentary irritation giving place to a blush of shame. Oh, how could she think that? How could she feel like that? And yet, if only the meeting had been delayed for a brief, the briefest of periods.

For here was Lady Mabel Pomeroy standing by, her eyelids dropping over her cheeks, a faint smile playing about the corners of her mouth. Here was the girl whose glib tongue had made such mincemeat of every kind of subject during the past half-hour, only too visibly indulging in visions of future sarcasm and ridicule—and here were the unconscious and defenceless objects of it even incurring her own censure, and annoying her by their

very presence. If they had only missed taking the same path, had only waited for a season where they were! All was confusion and vexation. It seemed as if a misfortune had suddenly happened.

Lady Mabel, what was she to Elma, or Elma to her? Why should it be a matter of consequence what the rattlepate thought or said? Why should it signify that the lace dress worn by the Duchess's daughter should now, as contrasted with the commoner fabrics and cruder colours of the new-comers, be transformed into a shining web of gossamer? Elma *would* not care, refused to be daunted, and struck down the demon in her heart—but all in a few swiftly passing seconds, there had come to her an experience never to be unlearnt; and never to the end of her life did she forget that pause beneath the shade, nor the scent of a large, sweet blossom near, whose fragrance was wafted towards her nostrils as she raised her proud young head to do battle for her friends. Whoever failed them, she would not. Whoever was ashamed of them, or amused by them, she would

be neither. Even supposing Mabel did laugh—but Mabel was not laughing: perhaps, it was just possible that she too was thinking better of her first impression, and was willing to be friendly and compliant. She had certainly given Elma to understand that "the girls" were to be admitted to her acquaintance, and accordingly—

"These are the people I was looking for," said the latter, turning pleasantly to her former companion. "Miss Exeter, this is Lady Mabel Pomeroy. My aunt is here, but she is not in sight," looking round, "although she was with us this minute, and"——

"We saw her, my dear; it was through seeing her that we knew where to look for you. I don't think your aunt saw me," added Miss Exeter cheerfully. "There are so many people—such crowds—and when one does not expect to see a face"——

The truth was Lady Alfreton had cut her dead, and the next moment revealed Elma's aunt and Mabel's mother at the elbow of the group, and every eye met unmistakably.

"Oh—h!" murmured Miss Exeter, feeling that the great moment had come.

Elma's heart beat, and she stepped hurriedly forward.

The duchess and Lady Alfreton passed on.

"I think I shall go to my mother now," announced Lady Mabel, with a calm glance round. "She looked to me to follow her, and I think your aunt looked to you," to Elma. "I dare say we shall meet again," proceeded the young lady, gliding easily past the black-beaded mantilla; "good-bye." Then from a few yards further off, "Elma, Elma."

But Elma did not stir.

"Are you not coming?" said Lady Mabel, retracing her steps in the emergency of the moment, for she was loth to lose her companion. "We were told to walk together, you know. Come along; they are waiting for us."

"I am not coming," said Elma, in a low voice.

"I am sure your friends will excuse you."

"My friends will—take care of me."

"But you are under your aunt's care."

"True. Go, my love," it was another voice which here interposed. "Go, dear Elma, your young friend is right; and Lady Alfreton," Miss Exeter strove to speak unconcernedly, "Lady Alfreton will not approve of your joining any other party than her own."

"I am sure she will not," cried Mabel, delighted with the unexpected support. "You see, ma'am, my mother and Lady Alfreton are just going to the tea place; I know they are, for I heard them say something about it as they passed, and so if Elma does not come now, she won't get any tea, and"——

Won't get any tea? What visions the words recalled. Yes, it was just tea time, and all the little tables would be getting ready beneath the trees at the other end of the gardens, and the poor "girls," clustering together now in mute discomfiture, with the long-talked-of exquisite possibility vanishing into thin air before their eyes, heard the gay reminder—and it seemed to Elma that the sad reproachful gaze of the whole party fell upon her. Her heart swelled beneath it. She had, indeed, she had to her

own view drawn it on herself. She had encouraged the hope when it had been but a dim and vague one, and had boldly answered for its realisation when even the most sanguine had doubted.

Would she now desert her ranks, and lightly clear herself of blame on the score of duty? She might easily do so. Even Miss Exeter whispered "Go," and it was plain that Mabel had interpreted aright the halt made by the two other ladies, who had remained where they were, and at this point beckoned with their fingers.

"There, I told you," proceeded the urgent damsel, seizing her arm. "They *are* waiting. And if we do not go early, we shan't get good places. Besides, I am dying for an ice," added she, laughing, "and you are only keeping your friends from going in search of some too, perhaps." But Elma knew better.

"One moment, please," and she darted to her aunt's side.

"Absurd, my dear," said Lady Alfreton the next minute. "Do nothing of the kind. I never

knew anything more ill-timed, more unfortunate," in an exasperated undertone. "Stay by my side, I desire you, Elma; there is no need to go back; you can explain to your schoolmistress to-night. I cannot have you associating with people with whom I am not acquainted while you are under my wing. Most annoying! Just when I particularly wished you to make a good impression on the duchess, and to get asked there, and be friends with Mabel,"—Mabel and her mother were engaged with some other acquaintances at the moment—"and it was all going so well," continued Lady Alfreton, with a frown; "I never knew any encounter more *mal-a-propos*. However," her brow clearing, "if you keep your back turned, and do not look at those people, nor go near them again, I dare say they will take the hint, and go quietly away of themselves. Yes, I see they have begun to do so. Then come to tea, my love," her spirits returning; "perhaps no great harm has been done. We must be on the watch not to come across them again, that is the only thing. Now, you and Mabel walk away, as you did before. Here is Mabel coming

for you. Are you come for Elma, my dear? Here she is! Elma! why, Elma, what is the matter?"

For down Elma's burning cheeks two small, hot, bitter tears were coursing.

CHAPTER IX.

PIERS EXPOUNDS THE WAYS OF THE WORLD.

ONLY Lady Alfreton saw them, only she guessed to what source they were due.

Mabel, who had caught the point of her parasol in the mesh of a passing scarf at the moment, was neither then nor thereafter enlightened, and as the two were now once more thrown into each other's company, and as she in her heart considered that Elma must be at least as well pleased with the arrangement as she was herself, she speedily gave vent to her feelings. "I must say that was well done, Elma; but if your aunt had not made a point of it, where would you have been? You would never have been able to effect an escape for yourself. I did what I could, but you did not

back me up. I suppose you were afraid. I must say they did look rather savage. So those were 'the girls:'" with a significant smile. "Well, now I know what those sort of girls are like. I—you won't be sorry when the time comes to leave school, will you, Elma?"

"I am sorry now, sorry and—ashamed," said Elma, in a tone that made her companion start. "Mabel, this did not matter to you"——

"What did not matter?"

"Our behaving as we did; treating them as we did, and leaving them as we did. Oh, it was not your fault—you meant no harm; they are nothing to you, and you are nothing to them; and if you did, did rather turn away from them"—— She stopped.

"Well, you know, Elma, they——but I am sorry if I was not civil. I am sure I meant to be civil," rather confusedly, "it was only that"——

"Oh, civil! Never mind—I dare say you were civil enough," cried Elma, still in the same suppressed indignant tone. "They would not care about *you*," she continued, unflatteringly, "it

was *me, me* that they would think about. It was I who told them to come, and promised to be here to help; and talked it all over so often —and—and now—oh! now what will they think of me?"

"They could see it was not your doing, at any rate." Even the thoughtless Mabel looked serious for a moment. "I shouldn't worry about it, if I were you, Elma. Any one with half an eye could see that you had to obey your aunt, and that it was she who called you away."

"If my aunt had only spoken, only just spoken to Miss Exeter! Miss Exeter—did you not see, Mabel?—Miss Exeter, she is the kindest, and best, and dearest of creatures, and she would never have put herself in Aunt Selina's way, nor been a trouble—I know she would not—but she could not help an accidental meeting; and then to be looked at, and not even—not even bowed to, nor shaken hands with!"

"Well, yes; Lady Alfreton might have been more good-natured," replied Mabel candidly. "But I don't think grown-up people are good-natured, do you? I daresay I shan't be good-

natured myself, by-and-by. Don't fret about it, Elma. You may be sure Miss Exeter, or whatever her name is, will have forgotten the whole thing by the time you get back there to-night. Nobody remembers those kind of things, you know: I never do: what's the use? Now, let us enjoy ourselves. What numbers of people are at tea already? And look, Elma," jogging her elbow, "look at the ices. The very sight of the ices makes me hot and thirsty at once. Ah, that's right. We are to sit there, are we? Lady Alfreton has just spied out the very best place possible. Mamma says Lady Alfreton always knows what to do—and so she does. Now, Elma, is not this nice, isn't it delightful?" Then lower, "Come, Elma, do smile again; do look as you did before; and forget all about those stupid people."

But Elma could not forget.

"Hallo! not finished yet?" exclaimed a voice behind her presently. "Go it, Elma; I always back you for a famous appetite in all weathers. How d'ye do," to Lady Mabel; "so you and Elma are still left at the board," for the duchess

and Lady Alfreton had drawn aside their chairs; "well, I hope you are enjoying yourselves," concluded Piers, leisurely sitting down, while the two pairs of rosy cheeks before him slightly coloured beneath his raillery, and the two spoons moved a little less briskly than before, as though to deny the imputation conveyed therein.

"Why shouldn't we like ices?" quoth Mabel, nevertheless. "I have had two, and so has Elma. I might have had three, if I had chosen."

"Have a third now?"

"No, thank you, I have finished now," and the speaker tried to draw herself up, and look elegant and dignified. "I only said I *might* have had, if I had chosen. We can hear the band nicely from here, can't we? What a beautiful afternoon it is! We have had a delightful afternoon from beginning to end,—haven't we, Elma? I should like to have just such another afternoon every day of my life,—shouldn't you, Elma?"

No reply. A sudden recollection manifest upon Elma's face.

For a brief space she had been cajoled into something like her former bounding spirits by the pleasant chat and dainty meal, and Lady Alfreton and Mabel alike had told themselves that the *contretemps* which had threatened to cloud the sunshine of the festive scene had passed safely into the background, soon to vanish altogether—but now Mabel's appeal awoke a dull pain, which showed itself at once on the frank brow of her companion.

Piers took a second glance at his cousin. "Something has gone wrong in that quarter," said he to himself.

But it was not for some time that he found out what the "something" was.

"Come along with me, Elma. Never mind the Mertouns. You needn't hang on to that girl if you don't like; she has got some one else now." The party had risen, and moved off. "Come this way," said Piers suddenly. "I'll look after you, and we'll meet them again. It's all right. What do you look at me like that for?"

"My aunt has told me already once to-day

that I am to stop with her, and go with her where she goes," replied Elma, her accents betraying that there was more than appeared in the reminiscence. "She must not have to tell me so twice."

"Pooh! Nonsense!" Piers turned to his mother. "How long shall you be here, ma'am? Half-an-hour or so? If I bring Elma to the entrance gate in half-an-hour"——

"Very well, my dear, very well. Not later, Piers. I cannot stop longer than half-an-hour—indeed, I had been going now"——

"All right. In half-an-hour. Now, Elma, down this walk; look sharp, that Mabel has the eyes of a lynx, and we have had enough of her. I say," after a swift turn or two down bye-ways, "I say, she said something to vex you just now. What was it? Don't tell if you would rather not, you know; only you are a lonely little thing," he added kindly, "and if you have not anybody else to turn to, you can tell me."

A small hand stole into his.

"Eh?" said he, immensely surprised. "What?"

Then he looked round, but they were out of sight of every one, or at least no spectators were within reasonable distance of the little bridge whereon the two were leaning. "What do you mean, Elma?" inquired Piers, looking down at the hand, with an odd sensation which he had never experienced before. "What made you do that?"

"Only to thank you," said Elma, looking up at him with soft, unconscious eyes. "You are always very kind, but"—— and she drew away the hand.

"But what?"

"I seemed to need it to-day," and her lip shook a little, in spite of herself.

"Something out of gear?"

Elma hesitated. Then all at once out it came: "You must not think it was Aunt Selina's fault; it was only that Aunt Selina did not know, and that she could never think, never have the least idea how Miss Exeter would feel about it. Miss Exeter thinks so much of Aunt Selina and of—of you all; and meeting her here with me, of course Miss Exeter ex-

pected, I mean she thought it likely that—that at least she would just be spoken to—and—and"——

"And my mother cut her?"

"And, Piers, *I* had to leave them too; and I could not even tell them how it was. We had talked about coming to this flower-show over and over again, and had agreed how we should meet, and—and all: and then we did meet just outside the large tent, and I was speaking to them, and Mabel was standing by, and my aunt and the duchess walked straight into the middle of us, and—then walked on," and Elma turned away her head, as if the remembrance were still too terrible to be borne.

"Well?"

"Then I wanted to stay with them for a little; could I help it, Piers? But when I asked leave, Aunt Selina said 'No,' and—and would not allow me even to tell them how it was."

"Why on earth not?"

"She did not like me to be seen with them."

"It seems to me that her ladyship has been tolerably rude. Trust women for knowing how to snub each other."

"O Piers! Aunt Selina did not mean"——

"Now, my dear Elma, listen to me. Give me your best attention for a few minutes, if you please, as your masters would say. I intend to deliver a brief lecture, which you must have the goodness not to interrupt; whether or no you profit by the same, is your own look-out. First then, my mother *did* mean to be rude; no one with my mother's reputed fine manners ever was rude without meaning it. She meant to make your worthy preceptress understand that although they have met once or twice privately, she is not to claim any sort of public recognition. If there is one thing in the world my mother cares about to the bottom of her soul, it is her social distinction, and this she considers would be endangered by her knowing any one of Miss Exeter's stamp, wherefore she simply will not know her. Do you understand this, Elma?"

"I suppose so, Piers."

"It is rather difficult to understand, isn't it?"

"Yes, Piers."

"Now for point number two. Half the men and women I know feel the same; if they have any humble connections or friends, if there are any people who are poor and shabby, and unfashionable, yet with whom they must associate under the rose, they keep quiet about it before the world. Before the world we all show ourselves only at our best. We have to think of our reputation, of our status, you know. Juliet thinks a lot about the girls she rides with, and the partners she dances with. My mother considers earnestly as to whom she will invite to her house. My father is particular that when he has a friend to dine at his club, that friend shall be of the right sort. I"—— he paused.

"You, too?" said Elma, in a low voice, for her heart had been growing cold under his smile. "You, too?"

"I, too? Yes. Why not I, too? I am no better than my neighbours. I am as senseless, and heartless, as selfish and vulgar as they. Vulgar! That's the word. That's what people

who do these things, and think these things, ought to be called. What is it but vulgarity that makes us afraid of the contamination of your Miss Exeters and the like? I'll wager Miss Exeter is a better woman than two-thirds of those whom my mother welcomes to her house—but my mother can't bring herself to exchange a simple greeting with her for fear of the Duchess of Mertoun's eye-glass. That was the meaning of it, Elma. My mother is not an unkind person"——

"Oh, no—no indeed."

"And if she had met Miss Exeter out of sight of everybody, Miss Exeter would have had nothing to complain of; but Miss Exeter was unfortunate. Not that she is worse off than others. We know people down in the country, know them tolerably well, whom we quietly ignore during the period when we are in Park Lane. I met a fellow yesterday, with whom I hunt every winter as regularly as the season comes round—but I saw something very interesting in another direction which engrossed my full attention till he had passed. I was

walking with a swell, do you see? That's the kind of *savoir faire* we men of the world have to practise. You follow me, Elma?"

Elma's head was hanging.

"Of course you feel the force of it? You are old enough to see the necessity for it?"

Still no reply.

"You will become an adept in the art yourself, I should say," continued her cousin, with affected carelessness. "There's time enough yet, of course; but one can't begin too soon. You had your first lesson to-day, Elma—an excellent one. Now, are you going to profit by it?" An interested spectator might have seen that he was marking her closely.

"No," said Elma, suddenly raising a flushed brow and sparkling eye. "No. Never, Piers, never! Whoever is so false, so mean, so cruel —*I* will never be. I will be the same everywhere, in all places, at all times. Those whom I like and respect, I will never be ashamed of, let who will be looking at me. And those I love"—— she stopped short, with heaving bosom and struggling breath.

"And those you love?" said a voice in her ear. "Go on. And those you love?"

"I will love for ever and ever." The answer was not so low but what he caught it.

CHAPTER X.

ELMA'S ACCOUNT OF FRIENDSHIP-MAKING.

ALTHOUGH the acquaintanceship between the Duchess of Mertoun's daughter and Lady Alfreton's niece had been begun under such fluctuating, not to say inauspicious circumstances, strange to say it throve, and eventually ripened into intimacy.

Mabel, in Elma's phraseology, was "not a bad sort of girl."

The youngest of a large, rambling family, she had begun life by being looked upon in the light of a nuisance by the elder brothers and sisters, some of whom already grown up into men and women, were ill-inclined to see another nursery begun, and the parents who should have been occupied solely with them

and their interests, doting upon the little late-comer.

Thence had ensued warfare.

As may have been already manifest, not all the elder brothers and sisters in Christendom could have extinguished the irrepressible Mabel at any period of her existence, and that astute young lady had early discovered her power—indeed, who can say how early an infant does not discover it? She had accordingly from first beginnings given back as good as she got; and supported by the favour of both father and mother, who would refuse to hear a word on the other side of the dispute or complaint, had held her own against all the other members of the family, whether singly or allied.

That she did not share the all but universal fate of such favourites, said something for a child so unfortunately placed.

Mabel was not detested, because Mabel, with all her faults, her impertinence, and her self-assertion, was by nature neither unfeeling nor untrue. Had her better qualities been called into play by a careful and judicious training,

had her home life been less of a perpetual combat for the mastery, less of a struggle betwixt folly and over-indulgence on the one hand and lack of amiable toleration and forbearance on the other, she would have been a very different person; and even as it was, Elma saw enough upon the occasions of her being at Mertoun House during the ensuing few weeks to warrant her shaking her wise head at her cousin Piers (who took, as he declared, a profound interest in the progress and development of the friendship), and maintaining with her own peculiar stoutness—a stoutness which always came to the front when the absent were attacked—that Mabel was "not a bad sort of girl."

"I know that is a good deal for you to allow," said Lady Alfreton one day, after her son had left the room; and she felt she could comfortably inquire a little further, and find out a little more from her niece—investigations which had been instinctively postponed before: "I know that is a good deal for you, Elma. You are such a stern little thing, and so set in

your opinions, that I did not really feel at all sure—ahem—I mean that it is quite a relief to my mind to hear you allow a most charming, intelligent, friendly young companion of your own age, to be "not a bad sort of girl."

"She really isn't, auntie."

"I can quite believe it, my dear," smiling.

"She talks like a steam engine; I can hardly get in a word; oh! you are laughing, you mean that I like to talk too; so I do, auntie, and that's it, I suppose. At first I thought it was not much fun just to sit under a waterspout and let it spout on my head. I told Mabel she was like a waterspout—but even that did not stop her; so now I just let her have her own way, and she gets tired at last. But sometimes that girl does make a mess of it!"

"Indeed! How?" Lady Alfreton was in the humour to listen patiently.

"She means no harm. Only she says straight out whatever comes into her head; and you know, auntie, *that* does not always do."

"No, Elma, it does not;" and a vision of Miss Exeter's name introduced at ill-advised

seasons made Lady Alfreton wonder for a moment whether she might not improve the occasion. But curiosity, and a desire to be at the bottom of Elma's present revelations, prevailed.

"So Mabel often says things that make mademoiselle—that's her governess—cross for the rest of the day, though mademoiselle might see for herself that they were really nothing to mind. When I tell Mabel what she said, and why mademoiselle was cross, then she is sorry—or at least she would be sorry if she liked mademoiselle better. If it were any one she was fond of—once or twice lately"—— Elma paused.

"Well, my love?"

"She was not—not quite—kind to me. I mean really not kind—I don't mean that we were quarrelling—but directly she saw that she had vexed me, she was so funny in her odd, rough way."

"Her what?" cried Lady Alfreton, opening her eyes. "Odd? Rough? My dear Elma! Mabel's manner may be a little, a very little

peculiar; she is not formed, you cannot expect her to be formed yet; but I must say I think you are too severe. Odd? Rough?" repeated she.

"Oh yes, auntie," Elma nodded. "Mabel is very odd indeed sometimes, and when no one is by she—but oh, it's nothing," with a swift fear of telling tales. "There is no harm in it. I understand what it means quite well now, and she is never happy till she has made up after anything disagreeable. *That* is what I do like in Mabel," proceeded Elma, with energy "She makes up so soon. She came to me yesterday, all at once, like lightning, and said she had been 'a beast.' Well, she had, you know."

"Dear me!" exclaimed Lady Alfreton, for such words had not been in vogue in her young days. "Dear me! I—how very extraordinary! She must have learned to say that from her brothers, I suppose. Still, really, in the lips of a young lady!"

"Oh, it's all right, auntie"—again Elma nodded reassuringly—"it's all right. We all call ourselves 'beasts' when we have been

behaving disagreeably. Only it was good of Mabel to be so quick about it. She had to hurry up, I can tell you."

"Hurry up!" murmured Lady Alfreton. She was not used to schoolgirls, or rather had not hitherto been so. "Well?" continued she.

"We were having rather a good quarrel on," and Elma laughed, as though at a pleasing recollection, "and we were rattling away at each other as hard as we could, when Mabel said something *really* nasty in the middle. Well, after that, of course I wouldn't speak to her; that's the way to do in a quarrel. It was my place to sulk, you know; so I had but just begun to sulk when the carriage was announced! You know you called for me rather sooner than you had said you would, last time I was there. Well, that was the time. So when the carriage was announced I did not know what to do; and I was thinking what I should do, when up jumped Mabel and hugged and kissed me, and said she had been 'a beast, before Fanchette had ever left the room! Now, if Mabel had not been really a *really* nice girl,

she would have waited till next time; or at least till I was bidding her 'good-bye,' before she made up."

"Oh, she is a really, *really* nice girl now, is she?"

Elma laughed. "Yes, auntie, really, *really* now."

"I am glad of it," said Lady Alfreton after a pause, and an internal resolution that after all some little cautions and hints might be slipped into the present opportunity. "I am sincerely glad that you seem to have made such a good friend. It is a great thing for you, Elma, to have a friend of that stamp. You must perceive what a difference there is between one of the Duchess of Mertoun's daughters and your present associates at Miss Exeter's school. Lady Mabel Pomeroy may be a little eccentric, and no doubt she has been a good deal spoilt—but by-and-by her refinement and elegance"——

"Dear auntie!" Elma rippled all over, and came and threw herself into a favourite attitude at her aunt's feet, confronting her with a pair

of mirthful, mischievous eyes, "dear auntie, I doubt very much, very much indeed, if you will ever see Mabel an elegant and refined young lady. There are girls at Miss Exeter's school a thousand times more refined and elegant already than Mabel ever could be. She has not a particle of elegance in her, and—and I don't think she has very much refinement either. Mabel is very nice in her own way. I do like her! And she is ever so much kinder and pleasanter now that we really know each other, than I had ever thought she could be when we took that first walk together. She made me laugh then, but still I did not know whether—I did not exactly know what to think about her. But you, auntie, don't seem yet to know Mabel. She is a comfortable, jolly, stupid girl (she does not mind being told she is stupid), when she is let alone. When she is worried, and can't have her own way, she turns the whole house upside down. But she is not mean, nor spiteful. She won't go to her mother on the sly for leave, and do things the rest don't like. I believe, you know," added

Elma with a shrewd smile, "I believe the poor duchess would rather she did sometimes, those elder ones are so down upon her about Mabel."

"You are a curious pair, I must say. I wonder what all the other inmates of Mertoun House would say if they heard your verdict, you little puss! To call Mabel stupid! I think the duchess's hair would stand on end. She is always crying up her darling's perfections, till I own—however, Mabel is an excellent friend for you." Lady Alfreton interrupted herself, and recurred to the main point, "And if she does not mind your calling her stupid"——

"Oh, auntie, I am not rude."

"My dear, I thought you said you did."

"No. She said it. She said one day that she knew—that she knew she was stupid, and I—I only agreed. And that was on a day," added Elma, somewhat bashfully, "on a day when we had not been nice to each other all through."

"It seems to me that there are a good many such days."

"You see, auntie, if there were not, we could never be really fond of each other. We might be good enough friends, and all that—but if we had to be polite, and obliging, and particular, when we were quite alone together, we should never get any further. It is only when girls are growing to be really a little fond of each other that they *can*, you know"——

"Can what?"

"Speak out, auntie. Bang out with anything. That's what makes friends. Directly I grew to be friends with Mabel, I told her how hateful she had been to Miss Exeter and them all, that day of the flower-show"—— Elma stopped short. She had "banged out" with more than she had meant now, with a vengeance.

"Well?" said Lady Alfreton drily. "You told her that, did you? And may I ask what was her reply?"

"Oh, auntie, don't be vexed. Perhaps I should not have said it, but somehow I felt as if I must. Because if it had been always a something between us never to be spoken about,

nor alluded to, it would have been too dreadful. So I thought I would have it out; and I was so glad I did, for Mabel was as good as gold. She said over and over again how sorry she was, after I had explained to her all about Miss Exeter's coming, and how kind it had been of her, and how she had only done it to please the girls, and how the girls had never been to a Botanic *fête* before, and"——

"Well, well!" In spite of herself, there was a twinge of conscience in the heart of Elma's auditor. "Well, well. It was a pity, but it could not be helped. Mabel—what did she say?"

"She said she would never behave again as she had done, if she lived to be a hundred! She wanted to do all kinds of things to make up. She offered to make her mother go and call on Miss Exeter"——

"Good heavens! My dear Elma! Surely not that! Surely you could not have allowed that?"

"No, auntie; for I did not see," replied Elma placidly, "what good it would have done."

"Well—good—hum. I daresay it might have done some 'good,' as you call it. It would always do a school good to have a duchess's carriage standing at the door."

"Would it?"

"But it would be very unsuitable—altogether unsuitable. A school of that kind! A school—ahem—all I mean is, my love, that I hope, if Mabel should ever again broach such a project, you will put a stop to it at once. Mind, Elma," very emphatically, "*at once.* It would simply never do. It is not to be thought of for a moment. You see, Elma, that I myself never go to Haverstock Hill, although you are my own niece—at least Sir Thomas's—and of course I take the greatest interest in you."

Elma laid her cheek in gratitude upon the hand she held. "Poor dear," murmured her aunt in a softer tone, "I wish it had been otherwise. If I *could* have had you all to myself—but however," recovering, "it is but for a time, and we shall see what by-and-by brings. But, Elma, dear child, you will observe what I say. If I have my reasons for not going near

your present abode, there can be no possible object in the Duchess of Mertoun's going. The duchess is an indiscreet person—that I am sure of, and she would talk and talk, and set people wondering—and then when you come out, and have left Miss Exeter and all her belongings behind you, you would find how awkward any such reminiscences would be. I am sure Miss Exeter is an excellent creature, and does her duty towards you"—for Lady Alfreton had grown to be nervous on the subject of Miss Exeter, and never dreamed now of mentioning her in anything but a conciliatory manner—"but she is so different to ourselves, to the Mertouns and us, and others of our set, that it would give neither her nor us any pleasure to be forced to associate. You are old enough to understand this now, Elma?"

"Yes, Aunt Selina."

"And—and to see that there is no unkindness meant, my love?"

"Yes, auntie."

"Well, Elma?"

But the door opened at the moment, and the

dubious note in Elma's assent remained unexplained. There had been a twinkle in her eye, however, and a little obstinate twitch of her lip as she had hearkened just before, which had not altogether escaped the speaker's observation.

Lady Alfreton was not so perfectly satisfied with the end of the interview as she could have wished to be.

CHAPTER XI.

THE BUD UNFOLDING.

THE secret of the above was this, that this little soft, sunshiny heroine of mine had thought out a good many things in her own mind since we last beheld her a few weeks ago.

She had heard a good deal, and seen a good deal, and had marked, learned, and inwardly digested a considerable amount, whereof, night after night, she metaphorically chewed the cud, what time the busy household was sunk in well-earned repose. Not that Elma herself was in the habit of lying long awake, but the mid-summer nights were hot, and there was but little air to be had sometimes when not a breath was stirring outside, and she did not drop off to

sleep so speedily as was her wont, just at this period.

Then she would lie thinking and thinking.

We will not trouble our young readers with the problems she tried to puzzle out: suffice it to say, that they were for the present confided to no one, not even to her cousin Piers. Sooth to say, he had not sought nor invited any confidence of the kind subsequent to that given on the rustic bridge in the gardens, on that summer evening whereof we heard in a former chapter. He had felt, with justice, that enough had been said, and perhaps would have unsaid some of it had he the power.

Elma, as we know, was not on the alert to penetrate into the motives which prompted much of what passed around her, in short, she was not a quick observer, except where the feelings and sensibilities of others might be in the question; the consequence was, that she had taken every word uttered by her cousin for the plain, unvarnished truth, whereas it will have been apparent to my readers that the young man had merely been giving vent to a sarcastic

humour, called into play by the accident of the moment. He had not precisely lied, but he had exaggerated and distorted; what was more, he had affected to justify that which in his heart he despised. The wearisome monotony of a useless life, whose sole object was the gratification of self in any form, would now and again goad into being such an ebullition as that above recorded; and as anything of the kind had long ceased to have more than the most ephemeral of effects upon either mother or sister, it had been a new and interesting experiment to let loose a little "worldly wisdom," as he called it, on the head of his cousin.

From this he had hitherto refrained.

There had been something in her clear, candid eye and confiding smile which had acted as a talisman against gloomy moroseness and ill-humour, as mists are fain perforce to melt in sunlight; but he had felt perversely inclined on the day in question, and with more of a certain kind of tenderness for and interest in Elma than he had ever before experienced, there had been mingled a chafing against her youth-

ful ignorance and inexperience, and a desire to shake her faith in men and women. Why should she be allowed to go on inhabiting a fool's paradise? What made them all sham as they did before Elma, in order to retain their places in the opinion of such a chit? She would have to know some day.

It had seemed to him that already there had been a kind of half awakening, and that it behoved him to rouse thoroughly the dormant, trembling suspicions, and shake them into form. He had seen that the young girl was not herself, that she was flushed, excited, and rebellious, quivering beneath the—to her—terrible scene just gone through, and the opportunity had been too tempting. Now, at last, it was obvious that Elma perceived something of what her aunt and cousins had striven in vain by hints, innuendos, and the like, to convey. Now she saw—albeit blindly and dimly—still she saw that which made her eyeballs burn.

It had often given rise to an incredulous smile on the part of Lady Alfreton's son to hear his mother described in Elma's glowing language.

He had whistled softly to himself on beholding the endearments lavished on Juliet. He had walked away with something like a sting at his heart after receiving the fervent clasp of a certain little "good-bye" hand, when he had put Elma into the carriage at the end of a "Park Lane day."

It was only a child's enthusiasm, he had told himself, and such enthusiasm would soon dwindle and fade away in the glare of the life before Elma—but meantime ought it to be let alone, or not? Up to the day of the Botanic *fête* he had decided in the affirmative, but that day had proved too much for him; Elma had been instructed, and every syllable had fallen like lead upon her breast. It had seemed to her, in the first blush of indignation and amazement, as though she could never love or trust any one again.

Time of course—time, and a night's repose and calmer communings with her own spirit, weakened the first impression. Still, once upon the track, almost every future half holiday, or other meeting—for as the end of the term drew near, various relaxations were permitted, which

resulted in Elma's being more at her uncle's and also at Mertoun House than she would otherwise have been—almost every meeting, we say, brought its own revelations.

Loth as the loving young heart was to acknowledge even to herself the same, Elma could not help perceiving that no member of Sir Thomas Alfreton's family ever thought of another, ever tried to please or help another. Her aunt would scarcely turn her head to listen when Juliet complained of an ache in her limbs, and a feverish burn in her throat and eyes—though Lady Alfreton had held Elma to her side a full half hour just before, whilst she had poured forth a detailed account of her own sleepless night and aching head. Sir Thomas, when informed that a doctor had been sent for on his daughter's account—it had been Juliet herself who had insisted on sending — had merely inquired whether a fashionable physician whom he had met abroad, and who had proved an agreeable companion, had been the one now summoned; and on receiving a negative, had taken no further notice. Juliet, upon recovering

from the sharp inflammatory attack to which the above had been a prelude, had been to the full as selfish and indifferent, taken up with her own comforts, and regardless of those of others. She had insisted, when ordered to the sea-side for change of air and scene, upon carrying off Lady Alfreton's own maid, to whom in her illness she had taken a fancy, and had been so unmoved by the dismay of her parent that Elma had mutely felt ashamed for both; for the mother, as well as for the daughter; since Lady Alfreton scarcely showed to more advantage when yielding, as she did at length, to sheer necessity and persistent demand.

Piers' words "senseless and heartless" rose up in his young cousin's memory as she had stood by on this last occasion, and, do what she would, she could not drive them from her remembrance.

But deep down in her bosom there was also another thought, and another hope, and something like another prayer. Had Elma not read once in an ancient book holy words which ran thus: "And a little child shall lead them"?

What was she but a little child? And what did they, those dear ones, need but a little leading? Oh! to be with them, to watch over them, to feel with them, to draw them on by a silken rein, if only—only she were strong enough! Oh! to see them all that she had erst so fondly hoped and firmly believed they had been! Oh! to give the lie to Piers, and show him—show him!—and here the blue eyes would well over, and there would be no words to explain the swelling of the childish heart. We must not pry beneath the curtain too far in a moment like this.

Let us, however, take one single glance back to the evening of that eventful June day referred to so often. Elma had had another conference ere it closed. Upon going home at night, she had been quite unable—indeed she had never once dreamed—of playing the part of easy forgetfulness suggested by Lady Mabel Pomeroy. Such a pretence she would have scorned (had there indeed been the slightest chance of its being successful, which she well knew there would not have been)—and what had taken

place in lieu thereof? This: a frantic step had flown, scarce touching the ground between, straight to Miss Exeter's own bedroom, and—greatly to that decorous spinster's amazement—to her own uncovered arms; rushing in moreover with such a whirlwind, that it had been of no avail to raise a finger or breathe a remonstrance. Miss Exeter, in the act of removing her cap from the little grey, frizzy curls so aptly described by Elma to her aunt, felt herself nearly deprived both of breath and cap, the one swept from her lips, the other from her fingers, and her first momentary impulse was to cry "Forbear!"

But the next minute brought its own interpretation.

It was Elma, her own Elma—the cruel, faithless Elma, whose name had been bandied hither and thither during the past hours; and whose defection (albeit she had sought to excuse it) had been taken for granted even by herself—Elma, who had indeed made some sort of stand, but who had looked so miserable, undecided, and faltering, even as she had done so, that all

had misdoubted her — Elma, who had seized upon an excuse to fly off to her aunt, and had never so much as turned once to look upon the deserted ones again—it was Elma who now approached, penetrating into the innermost sanctum of the injured ones.

But could Miss Exeter now be angry any more? Listen!

"No, no, my dear. Come, come, my dear. Never mind, Elma. Why, Elma, my love!—oh, really you must not cry so, my dear!—a great girl like you! Why, my dear!—my dear! —poor child!—Elma, pray, dear Elma, have a little more self-control"—governess and woman struggling for the mastery in an inexpressibly comforted and gratified bosom—"My dear, dear child, be calm; and tell me, pray tell me, what is all this about? What *is* the matter?"

But she had known well enough what the matter was, and in the trembling, sobbing form she held with all a mother's tenderness, there had been felt to be the fullest reparation for everything that had been suffered.

There had been no need, no real need for the broken whispers, the half smothered, disjointed, and altogether ungrammatical attempts at explanation. We may safely affirm that Miss Exeter was better pleased with them, such as they were, than had they been expressed in the purest English.

All had been understood, and would have been understood even without words at all. Next, Miss Exeter, herself undeniably excited and little less tearful, had undertaken, and that in the solemnest manner, to make the matter equally clear to the rest. Yes, yes; Elma was to trust to her for that. Elma's heart need not trouble her on that point. Elma might be at peace.

Then, when something of a calm had succeeded to the storm, it had seemed to the good governess that she too might let fall a hint or two. (It would seem as though every one wanted to hint to Elma, when they had the chance.)

"Dear girl, you and I have each had something of a lesson to-day;" thus had begun the

excellent Miss Exeter, after a preliminary clearing of the throat, and a little surreptitious additional wiping of the eyes. "My dearest pupil, I shall not regret mine, if it teaches you yours. 'Now that I know my Elma is the same to me that she has ever been," tenderly, "I mind nothing. When I thought I had lost her, I felt—yes—I felt pained and hurt more than words could express. But never mind—never mind," hastily, for Elma was hiding her head again; "we need not revert to such a mistaken notion, need we?" the speaker had continued more briskly, "it was a simple misunderstanding, and no more. Your aunt"——

"O Miss Exeter! do not speak of her."

"My dear, I shall say nothing improper for me to speak, nor for you to hear;" and the little schoolmistress had drawn herself up as one not accustomed to dictation. "No, my dear Elma," more gently, "I have not a syllable to utter against your aunt. She has a perfect right to act on such an occasion as she chooses; and if she does not choose to recognise me out of school hours, I shall understand for the future not to

expect it. The only thing I now care about" —— and the speaker paused.

Elma had drawn closer.

"I am thinking of your future," Miss Exeter had gone on presently—"your future, and how it will affect you. Can your aunt mean that if you are to make your home with them, you are to know none but the rich and the great? Can she be about to teach you that none else are worthy of your regard or affection? Oh, I hope not—I trust not. For myself, I would not for worlds intrude—I would not be a thorn in your side"——

"O Miss Exeter!"——

"My love, pardon me; I was but speaking aloud. I ought not to have used such an expression. Still, if there were to be any trouble about me, Elma, if it were to be any difficulty, or give rise to any feeling of discord, remember I must not be allowed to do this. I would not stand in your light for a moment. Sir Thomas can offer you advantages of station and fortune which are not to be despised; added to which he is your nearest living relation, and your

sole guardian. If he adopt you—as I cannot but think he must mean to do—it will be your duty to obey him and your aunt in all points, except where—and God grant this exception may never be called into play—except where conscience steps between. On all matters of merely social or domestic importance, you will see clearly set before you in the light of the Gospel, dear Elma, that it is your place cheerfully to give up your own will when it runs counter to theirs. As they are so kind to you, and already so affectionate towards you, this will be no hard matter. For *me*"——

"Yes?" whispered Elma, listening closely. "Yes? For you?"

"Oh, my darling, I would give you up—give you up entirely if need be. I would never see you, nor hear from you, nor meet you, could I but know you were well and happy. I would"——

"Can you not trust me? Then wait and see!" And in the ring of the sweet young voice which had thus responded, there had been

a thrill of deep and steadfast meaning which had carried with it a strange conviction.

No more had been said.

After such an interview it may well be supposed that Lady Alfreton's distilled wisdom, as detailed in the last chapter, fell somewhat flat.

CHAPTER XII.

MISS EXETER'S BIRTHDAY PROGRAMME.

IT was the day before Miss Exeter's birthday, and the time-honoured custom at Miss Exeter's school was that the great event should be observed as a whole holiday.

Furthermore, there was an understanding of equally ancient date, that the holiday was to be passed as it were in unison. The entire school struck one jubilant note, and any other, even though a perfectly harmonious one, would have been esteemed a discord.

This latter piece of strict etiquette was, however, tacit, not openly proclaimed. Nay, it was rather supposed to be a surprise to Miss Exeter than otherwise.

Regularly as the auspicious morn came round,

Miss Exeter, after detailing her own programme, would subjoin, with a little preliminary cough, the following—"But if any one prefers to spend the day among her own friends, I hope that she will understand she is at perfect liberty to do whatever pleases her best," after which she would go through the form of looking invitingly round, and pausing for a reply.

But no reply in the affirmative would ever come.

Even had any churlish ingrate in her heart of hearts desired to separate herself from the rest, and mumble her bone in unsociable retirement from the festive scene, it would have been more than such a one dared to own as much. Indignation and reproach—nay, ignominy for evermore—would have been her portion.

For it was well known that dear to Miss Exeter's heart was this great day of the year, and that as on it she laid herself out to entertain, to please, amuse, and gratify each and all under her charge, so did she equally value their appreciation of such endeavours, and response to such efforts.

The birthday—*the* birthday, as it was called—was the one yearly occasion upon which the rigid little schoolmistress permitted herself to be made much of in true, feminine, affectionate, demonstrative fashion, the one chance allowed her naturally sociable disposition for indulging, without detriment to tutelage or discipline, in an outbreak of hospitable revelry. Hours were changed, rules were flung to the winds on this one day of the year.

There was a late breakfast, a scrap luncheon—or rather a series of scrap luncheons, everybody getting what they wanted, at what time they wanted it; there were cups of tea on little trays to suit the various goings and comings; there was no dinner at all, but there was a late supper, a sumptuous supper, a supper which, served at the dissipated hour of half-past eight, set out with choicest flowers, and plentifully supplied with all the delicacies of the season, was felt to be the crowning glory of the whole. For it was whispered that when arranging this feast, the most reckless and extravagant orders were given by Miss Exeter. From it no pupil,

old or young, at Miss Exeter's school, would have absented herself for legions of worlds.

Perhaps no one who does not know what it is to be in the habit of doing a set thing at a set hour, daily or weekly—of living by fixed rule even under the most just and humane of autocrats—can appreciate the exquisite satisfaction of breaking loose, even though it be but for once and a way, nor the intensity of delight which accrued to my heroine and her schoolfellows from the turning of every ordinary moment topsy-turvy, which the 15th of July brought annually to the inmates of the corner house on Haverstock Hill.

"It is like waking up in a different world," Elma sought to explain to her friend Mabel. "It is like this, you know. We do now and then get a whole holiday; we get one for the Queen's birthday, of course; and if there is any great public event, Miss Exeter is sure to be very smiling, and say, 'I think upon such an occasion I cannot do less than grant a whole holiday;' but those holidays are almost as unlike this one as they are unlike school-

days. We all say 'Thank you,' and fly off as fast as we can go, to any house where we may —to relations, or friends, you know; we never dream of stopping at home—I mean at school —if we can possibly help it. But to-morrow" —(for as we have said, it was the eve of the auspicious day)—"to-morrow there is a feeling in the air"—and Elma shook her little business-like shoulders with excitement—"there is a something runs through and through us all, before ever we are awake in the morning, a kind of voice that says we're all thinking the same thing, and feeling the same thing, and no one is going off by herself, but we are all together going to have the best of times. That is what we feel—and I think that is what Miss Exeter likes us to feel. Well, we are so excited that we are sure to wake early, and hardly want to stay in bed till the late breakfast—only we do like the late breakfast all the same, it seems so grand and fine and like other people to be strolling down to breakfast at half-past nine—and besides, Miss Exeter says it keeps us from being too tired by the end

of the day. So then, after prayers and breakfast, and the giving of the presents—I told you about them before—Miss Exeter stands up, smiling all over, to tell us what *she* is going to do; we are all to do what we like—we have planned it all out ages before among ourselves, you know, and Miss Exeter very likely guesses that, but she makes as though she knew nothing, and announces *her* programme, as she calls it, to begin with."

"And what is the programme? Don't skip. Tell me every single thing," adjured Mabel, with the deepest earnestness; for by this time, as we know, she had come to take an unfeigned interest in the fortunes of the girls, and knew a great deal more about Elma's principal friends and associates than merely their names. "What does Miss Exeter herself do?"

"She presides over a shopping party, as she calls it, in the morning. We think she keeps all the shopping that she knows we girls will like for the birthday; she seems to have such a quantity to do, and all at such nice, amusing places. We go down to Bond Street in an omnibus——" Elma paused.

"An omnibus—yes," nodded Mabel, (by way of saying, "I know perfectly what an omnibus is; I have seen them; don't stop to instruct my ignorance,")—"an omnibus. I dare say that is part of the fun. I often think how I should like to go in an omnibus."

"Well, I don't," confessed Elma, candidly. "They are dreadfully hot and headachy, and some of them shake one a good deal besides—but then we never *show* we mind; because, of course, Miss Exeter would rather be driving in a nice, open carriage herself; and of course she has no other way of taking us; and she always insists upon paying everything for everybody on her birthday—so we get into the omnibus all right, and it is no very great way to go, and as soon as we get to the Marble Arch we have only to walk off."

"But do all the girls go? The whole school?"

"Oh dear, no," said Elma merrily. "Every governess heads her own party, some one way, some another. Miss Mordern nearly always chooses to see pictures, but those who go with her bargain for the Burlington Arcade, at any

rate; then Mademoiselle Marie goes to French places and gets chocolate and artificial flowers, and slips into the Row to see the riders, about half-past twelve. Though nobody would think it, Mademoiselle Marie is perfectly crazy about horses; her brother is in some French cavalry regiment."

"Never mind him, Elma. But do you not go with her then? I thought you were fond of horses too?"

"Ah, but I like being with Miss Exeter better. I stick by her all through the day. Besides, those girls who go to the Row in the morning come in late, and are tired, and like to sit in the gardens reading story-books afterwards. They are generally the little girls. Only four of us older ones go with Miss Exeter, and we come in rather early—that is, we are all at home about two, and then we go to rest in the heat of the day in our own rooms, and about four tea comes round."

"No? Tea? You luxurious creatures!"

"It does indeed! A tray comes tapping at each door"——

"The tray does?"

"And when it comes to ours, Henrietta's and mine, we bounce up, and shout 'Come in, Mary! What is it, Mary?' as if we had no idea! For part of the pleasure is that nothing has been *said*, do you see? So then Mary says, 'Miss Exeter thinks that a cup of tea will do you young ladies good before you go out again, and will you please be ready to start at a quarter to five o'clock."

"And where are you to start for?"

"For the park. For the park at the really fashionable hour of the day. Think of that, Mabel! You and I do it, you know, with our own people; but Miss Exeter and the girls never do, except on this one day. And it is so nice going all together, and going when other people are going—not just coming in from our walk in the nice, cool time of the day, and sitting down to our stupid dinner when all the best of the people are turning out again."

"But I cannot imagine why Miss Exeter should not keep the same *hours* as we do,"

interposed Elma's auditor, with very natural ignorance. "Anybody can dine when they choose, I suppose, and go in and out when they choose, if they arrange to do it."

"Oh, that would never do for a school, my dear"—Elma shook her superior head—"never at all. There are all kinds of things to be thought of in a school; and we don't mind neither, once we are fairly *at it*. In the winter we don't mind at all; it is cheerful and cosy to be sitting down in a nice, warm, bright dining-room at six o'clock, with a good long evening before us afterwards. Henrietta says we are very well off to dine at six, and that Miss Exeter has many nice ways that are not usual at girls' schools."

"Well, yes, I dare say; now finish with the birthday, there's a dear." It must be owned Elma was apt to digress, and never failed to do so when there was a chance of putting in a word for Miss Exeter. "Now go on," adjured Mabel.

"Well, there we are walking up and down, as grand as every one else. We stroll about,

we sit down—Miss Exeter always will have chairs—we meet some of her friends who know she will be there, and come on purpose; and last year we saw the Princess of Wales and her daughters pass three times, once quite close, and Mr. and Mrs. Gladstone"——

"One can see them any day. Well?"

"Well? What? There isn't any more."

"Don't you do anything more?"

"No, indeed; we stop till it is quite late, till every one is off to dress for dinner. Then we go too, and we know what we are going to have when we get home."

"What?"

"The very finest supper you can imagine. I will tell you all about it another time. There is everything at it—everything. Miss Exeter tries to surprise us with something new each year; and though we are pretty tired by that time, we always dress in our best, and so does Miss Exeter—oh! there's the bell, Mabel, that is for me—good-bye."

"One moment, Elma. How many of you go to the park—four?"

"Only three. Miss Exeter says we cannot walk more than two abreast in the afternoon. Good-bye."

"Who stops behind? Not you?"

"No, no! Clara—Clara Nugent. But she does not stop behind, she goes to an afternoon concert with an aunt. She is a musical girl, and rather poor, and Miss Exeter makes her a present of a ticket—there is sure to be a concert somewhere or other—and so, though she spends all the rest of the day among us, she just has her concert different."

"What a good time you must have," said Mabel, rather quietly for her. And she forgot to respond to the third joyous "good-bye" of her departing visitor, but appeared instead to be thinking.

CHAPTER XIII.

"I ONLY WANT TO DO A LITTLE KINDNESS FOR ONCE."

"MAMMA, you cannot really mean it!"

"Why, my dear, I see no objection."

"The thing is absurd! that is the objection; I really wonder, mamma, what you will give in to next. Mabel makes both you and herself ridiculous. The idea of her sitting up alone in your own carriage"——

"But, my dear Florence, why not?" Florence was Mabel's elder sister, the next in age, and the next in dominance among the Duchess of Mertoun's daughters. With her the duchess would deign to parley, the rest were merely set aside. "Why not?" proceeded the fond parent, exculpating her darling. "I really prefer Mabel's little cart occasionally, and it amuses me; in it

I can go for an informal, refreshing trot along the embankment, which will set me up for the evening far more than the crowded park. I think it quite a good idea of Mabel's! And it pleases the poor child"——

"It is so absurd!" Lady Florence was not good at an argument. "Nobody with her; she sitting up all by herself in state!"

"Then why not go with her, some of you? Why not go yourself?"

"She knows I am engaged," shortly. "Mabel knew perfectly well that none of us could go before she made the suggestion. She took her own time for doing it too: we should never have heard a word of the matter if Truefit had not happened to send in for orders about the pony-cart after luncheon. Mamma, I do wonder how you can spoil Mabel as you do. You have spoilt her till"——

"Till she can no more be spoilt," cried a gay voice behind the speaker, and the said Mabel appeared, fully equipped for her expedition. "Aha! I heard you, Florence. And you are quite right. It is of no use trying, mamma

I cannot take on any more spoiling, as Florence says, so I must just put up with what I have got already. What is Florence scolding about now? Our exchange of carriages?"

The duchess looked at her fondly. "You will look droll, mamma, but so shall I! I like to look droll, don't you? I will go in among all the other people, and trundle solemnly up and down, all by myself, as you do! And you shall scamper along by the river side, feeling the fresh air blow on your cheeks, and into your eyes, and sending all your headache away in a puff, as it sends mine on the French-verb days."

"I dare say it will do my headache good, my darling."

"No doubt that was why Mabel suggested the experiment," observed Florence sarcastically. "Mabel is always so thoughtful for others."

Mabel reddened.

"I don't see why I should be thoughtful when no one else is thoughtful," began she angrily. "I never said it was because of mamma's headache I asked her to go; I only said that as she *was* going, it might do her headache good.

I am not hypocritical"—and she stopped, breathing defiance.

"No, indeed! Mabel is never that!" cried her sure partisan, catching the infection. "Indeed, Florence, you ought not to pretend to think her so. And for my part, if *I* choose to lend my carriage to any one, it is *my* affair. What you can find in such a simple matter to make a grievance of," continued the duchess plaintively, "I am sure I cannot imagine."

Florence shrugged her shoulders. "It is only a part of the whole," she muttered, and left the room.

"Cross thing!" cried Mabel, with a sigh of relief. "I was so afraid that she was going to insist upon going out with me, or upon Edith's going, and that would have spoilt everything. I want to go quite alone—quite by myself. I will tell you all about it when I come home, mamma," patronisingly, "only, you know, you must keep it to yourself, or you might get us both into a scrape."

"But, my darling child"—— and the poor duchess looked slightly perplexed and anxious.

"Into a scrape, my love? I did not understand that. Had you not better just give me a hint?—I would not say a word to your sisters, but, you see, you are still so young."

"Oh, I am all right;" and Mabel nodded reassuringly. "Never you mind, mamma, I know what I am about, and I cannot possibly tell you beforehand. There is nothing—*really* —only"——

"Why not take Elma Alfreton?"

A flash from Mabel's eye.

"Is that it?" cried the duchess, delighted with her own acuteness. "You want to take Elma? By all means. But why not have said so before? What harm could there be in taking Elma? And Lady Alfreton is always pleased with the attention."

"Well, that's it, and yet it's not it," replied Mabel, who, as we have said before, with all her faults, was truthful. "I do not want to pick up Elma, but"——

"But I thought as much," said her sister, re-entering. "You think that you two girls sitting up in mamma's carriage will attract

attention, and that people will take notice of you, and stop the carriage to speak to you."

"I never thought anything of the kind."

"That is why you have put on your new frock and hat," continued Florence, with a sneer, "and I dare say you have told Elma to do the same, and"——

"I did *not!* I have *not!* Elma does not know I am coming. She does not know anything about it. She"——

"My dear!" interposed the duchess in surprise. "Elma does not know? Then where is the use of going? You will never find her. I thought I understood"——

"Mamma, if you think you understand Mabel you are mistaken!" Again Florence smiled scornfully.

The duchess looked at each in turn. What was she to say? How should she decide? Hitherto it had been Mabel against the world, everything that Mabel did being right, everything she said excusable. But in the present instance it seemed for once as if really—really—and she looked weakly from one daughter to

the other, and showed her doubts and indecision in her face.

If only Mabel would speak out! Be plain and confide in her! In that case she would fight Mabel's battle to the last drop of her blood; but how to defend a mystery she knew not.

The carriage was announced. "She is to go, then?" said Florence, seeing the day was lost.

"Of course she is to go!" Mabel faced her sister with a flushed cheek and steady eye. "Of course she is to go!" Then buttoning on her gloves nervously, "Good-bye, mamma, good-bye."

"Good-bye, dear love," whispered her mother. "I hope—ahem—I hope you will enjoy your drive." (Then louder, for Florence was still watching and listening) "I—I—really Florence, I wish you would not look at me like that," sharply. "You are very rude. Surely I may say 'good-bye,' to Mabel if I choose, without your permission! Mabel—ahem—be careful, my love," (in her ear), "a little careful. You will not do anything foolish or imprudent?"

"I don't want to do anything foolish or

imprudent, mamma." There was a twitch of restive shoulders. "Why should you suppose it?" Then with a sudden softening of tone and accent, "I only want to do a little kindness for once."

CHAPTER XIV.

A DRIVE IN THE PARK.

PERHAPS she ought not to have done it, but I think my readers will excuse Mabel for what followed. Recollect that from her childhood she had been accustomed to follow up every fancy and gratify every whim; and that now—now when a nobler emotion was agitating her young breast, it seemed to her as if any one who should attempt to thwart her in giving it free play was to be defied or outwitted.

Her sisters, one and all, would, she knew, have been against her on her present errand; even her mother could hardly have been depended upon for approval or support; and accordingly she had asked counsel of no one, and

had merely obtained as much permission as was absolutely necessary.

She was now radiant with triumph; and though in itself the triumph was perchance not especially worthy of praise, there was a glow of another kind within the young girl's bosom, which was an earnest of better things for the future than had ever been yielded by the past.

"I cannot possibly miss them, but still I must watch like a cat. There are such a lot of people out to-day. And how stupid of me not to ask Elma if there were no particular places they went to when they sat down! Thomas!"—leaning forward. Thomas looked round, and touched his hat. "Say I want to drive in the inside line as much as possible—and close to the path. Tell Truefit he must manage." Then the little lady sat back again, excited but demure.

"Florence need not be afraid," thought she; "I am not going to play any pranks. We shall all sit up as correctly as possible; and I will answer for it Miss Exeter knows how to sit as well as mamma, or anybody. Poor, dear Miss

Exeter! I feel quite fond of her now, from Elma's accounts. I seem to know every turn of the frizzy curls, and every poke of the little bonnet. Elma *will* be pleased. She—why, there they are! There they are!" and the soliloquist almost leaped up in her eagerness, as her eye at that moment detected the black-beaded mantilla—Miss Exeter's own black-beaded mantilla, with the black lace parasol overhead, and the white frock of Elma next it. The little party was walking slowly towards her, but their heads were turned the other way.

In another instant, however, the Duchess of Mertoun's footman had drawn the ladies' attention to Lady Mabel Pomeroy, seated in an open carriage, by the side of the railing.

"I have come on purpose. You really must. —Elma will tell you. I knew you would be here; and this is my mother's own carriage; and I have borrowed it for myself and my friends. I want you all to come for a drive. Please, Miss Exeter, don't say 'No'!"

Could any one have had the heart to say "No"? There was something so genuine, so

frank, and so unmistakably earnest in the appeal, it was so evidently intended to be acted upon, and the speaker was so entirely another person to the serenely impertinent Lady Mabel of the flower-show, that Miss Exeter felt more at a loss than she had ever done in her life.

When rudely treated, she had been able to respond with quiet dignity; when slighted, she had turned aside the slight by the very seeming not to perceive it; but she hardly knew where she was, or what she ought to say, beneath all those eager eyes turned upon her, on the present occasion.

Moreover, the high-swung, easy, elegant equipage did look exceedingly tempting.

"Let down the steps, Thomas." Lady Mabel took the matter into her own hands, but not unpleasantly. "It is all right, isn't it? Yes, I thought so. I thought Miss Exeter would not refuse me upon her *birthday*," added the speaker, with a smile that made beautiful her whole face. "I want to have my share of the birthday too."

"You must not think I am a forward girl, Miss Exeter," continued Mabel, when all were

settled, and the carriage moving on, "because, you see, we really were introduced to each other at the Botanic *fête*—only I did not seem to know you then, and I was very hot, and very cross; and I think I behaved badly to every one that day. But Elma knows me now; she knows I want—to be friends. Elma, you will say a good word for me, won't you? Tell Miss Exeter that mamma lets me run on at home—they all have to let me, whether they will or not—so she must try not to mind if I chatter now." Miss Exeter looked all that was benign. "Are you three comfortable?" proceeded the young hostess, with infinite solicitude. "There's plenty of room, isn't there? Please, which is Henrietta, and which is Maggie? But I think I know," as all laughed. "Henrietta is the tall one. Elma says you are ever so much taller than I!" her looks expressive of admiration for the slim, willowy figure opposite. "But I am taller than Elma, at any rate." And so on, and so on.

If Mabel had talked incessantly for the next three hours, I do not think any one would have thought the less of her for it. She was so

pleased, so happy, so eager, so brimful of spirits, so anxious to please, so charming in her frank self-forgetfulness, in short, so irresistible altogether, that she won the hearts of all on the spot.

Then how did Elma feel? Elma's eyes were full. She had never thought to be so proud of any one. She had never known what it was to have a friend to be proud of before.

It was the warmest and loveliest of July evenings. All the world was out, enjoying the balmy atmosphere and brilliant spectacle, as up and down our little party went; and there were no more smiling countenances, and perchance few hearts as light, as those pertaining to the occupants of the Duchess of Mertoun's carriage that day.

At length the time to part drew on.

Barouche, landau, brougham, phaeton and dog-cart followed each other in swift succession out of every gateway. Miss Exeter's watch peeped forth, and her little speech began.

But she had only got as far as "If you could kindly put us down at the corner next the

gate,"—— when not another syllable was permitted. There was a momentary demur and protest, and, "Oh, I could not think of it, my dear," from the elder lady, an "I could not think of it" which was overruled in a moment by the younger; and then the direction to Miss Exeter's house on Haverstock Hill was given in Mabel's shrill, clear voice, and away went the carriage bowling along till the steps were let down at the corner house.

Elma was the last to leave it. Each one said something grateful and pretty as she departed, and for each the duchess's daughter had some pleasant and friendly response; but when Elma's turn came, there was just one quick, close kiss, and not a single word from either.

Only each understood what that kiss meant, and was perfectly satisfied therewith.

CHAPTER XV.

"CAN A PERSON BE IN TWO SETS OF SOCIETY AT THE SAME TIME?"

THE Duchess of Mertoun was at first a little surprised, then much amused, and finally immensely proud, when informed of the use to which her august equipage had been put.

"That dear child!" she cried to the duke in private, afterwards. "That she should have thought of such a thing! How her sisters do misunderstand and misjudge Mabel! Even now I really do not venture to tell them of our darling's goodness and kindness, for they would be sure to laugh at it. But was it not sweet of her? And to tell nobody, and to carry it out all by herself! Such spirit! Such cleverness!

"Ha! ha! ha! Trust Mabel for that," re-

sponded Mabel's papa with keen appreciation. "The impudent little thing! I wish I had seen her!"

"Indeed, so do I. Dear child! I am glad, however, that none of the rest of us did see her," added the poor duchess nervously. "We should never have heard the end of it. As it is, when Florence inquired of me this morning what Mabel did, I merely replied that she drove with Elma Alfreton in the park. There was no need for me to say more. Surely if *I* am satisfied with darling Mabel's conduct, no one else has any right to interfere."

"It was a very proper thing to do," agreed the duke, setting his seal upon her approbation—though perhaps in his heart little less anxious than she herself to evade having to make it public, "a very praiseworthy action for a little girl." Both parents still fondly thought of the baby of the family as a little girl.

"My poor mother was the most benevolent of human beings," added the speaker pensively; "always thinking of others, always planning

for others; and Mabel takes after her. We do not do half enough for our fellow-creatures now-a-days, I am afraid," and he gave a little sigh.

But it was time for him to go off to the House of Lords, and he had to say when he would be at home again, and whether or no he would accompany his wife to this or that entertainment afterwards,—for the Duke and Duchess of Mertoun were a much more attached couple than were Sir Thomas and Lady Alfreton, or indeed most of their set, and were seen quite often together,—and by the time one and another arrangement had been made, and the conjugal interview terminated, he had forgotten all about Mabel, or, rather, Mabel's last escapade.

Not so the duchess.

She felt as if she must have another auditor. But who should it be? Lady Alfreton.

It came to her with a sort of inspiration that Elma's aunt would appreciate the kindness shown to Elma's schoolfellows; and having known nothing of the affair at the Botanic

fête—for nobody had felt disposed to enlighten her—she now betook herself to Park Lane, in order to ring the changes on the theme uppermost in her thoughts.

To talk about Mabel, her darling Mabel, was at all times only too delightful, but now! To tell the truth, the duchess's friends wished their worst enemies no harder fate than to be closeted with her grace for an hour when in that vein; but now—now when the dear, warm-hearted, thoughtful, considerate child—(Mabel's virtues developed and expanded upon every fresh review of them)—now when she had distinguished herself in a manner so noble—(it had grown to be noble ere Lady Alfreton's house was reached)—what could be more natural than that Mabel's mother should wish to tell her dear friends, one and all, about it? Lady Alfreton, for obvious reasons, came first on the list, and Lady Alfreton had in consequence the tap turned full upon her in its first vigour.

Poor Mabel would have been sadly mortified had she known. Her young heart had but just opened to a strange, new joy, in comparison

with which "all other joys grow less;" and in the very novelty there had been a sweetness which now made the memory of it almost sacred. She had felt actually ashamed, curiously shy, even with her mother, when disclosing what had taken place; and had laughed lightly aside the flattering astonishment of that most indulgent of auditors. She had not cared to hear more than she could help, even of the duchess's praise. It had made her, she could not have told why, abashed and uncomfortable. Such a little thing to have done! Such a mere trifle to have been made so much of. A kindness which had not cost her the veriest shadow of self-denial nor effort.

And before she went to sleep that night there rose in the heart of a hitherto heedless girl something of an aspiration that she might in the future lead a better, kinder, more useful and unselfish life than she had ever done before. Already the first step towards it had been taken.

But Lady Alfreton was aghast at what she heard. From the lips of any one else she

would almost have refused to credit such an extraordinary tale. The duchess of course must know, and of course (inwardly) Mabel was an unthinking, ignorant schoolgirl—but nevertheless it was all she could do at first to overcome open incredulity, and secondly, not to manifest the repugnance to which the narration gave birth, when she could no longer doubt.

Five great women sitting crowded together in a barouche! Pah! If there were one thing her ladyship objected to more than another, it was having her own elegant equipage full. Two occupants—or, at the outside, two and Elma—were to her mind enough. But five!

"They must have been terribly crowded," observed she ruefully.

"I dare say. But they would not mind that, young girls, you know, are so slight, and"——

"There was the governess."

"Mabel says she is a little bit of a thing, not so large as herself."

"Oh, Mabel is very fully formed for her age. She is growing to be a fine-looking girl on a large scale;" and Lady Alfreton, who disliked

people on large scales, felt as if somehow or other she had got in a side slap, for, to tell the truth, she longed to wreak her annoyance on the head of the perpetrator of the mischief. "But, my dear Duchess, was it not a little, just a little odd? Would not your friends wonder whom you had got there?"

"Dear me, what if they did?" Perhaps the Duchess of Mertoun felt that she could afford such wonder.

"So long as the girls enjoyed themselves, I am sure I am quite happy that they should," she added benignly. 'And as for dear Mabel, I was so pleased"—— &c., &c., &c.

By the time the interview was over, Lady Alfreton was tolerably sick of Mabel.

"And the worst of it is, that I cannot help fearing that it must have been Elma who put that crazy idea originally into her head," she confided to her son, after their visitor had left. "You know how Elma always will talk of Miss Exeter, and Miss Exeter's ways, and her likings, and dislikings, and the habits of that whole tiresome school, as if they must interest every-

body and be of importance to everybody. She does not mind in the least who is here, she never can understand to hold her tongue. I look at her. I cough. I talk quickly of something else. But no. By this time I have learned that it is absolutely useless to try. If ever I do attempt to turn aside the information she is resolved to bestow upon us, my little effect is sure to draw forth something infinitely worse."

Piers laughed.

"And you, Piers, I must say you set her on."

"I do, ma'am—I own it."

"Oh, you own it?"

"Yes; I like to hear Elma. She is so natural; so unconscious; so secure, as you say, of the sympathy and interest of her audience, and so firmly convinced of their goodwill, that it is irresistible to 'set her on' as you call it. In her eyes, Miss Exeter and her surroundings are of every bit as much consequence as you and yours, or the Duchess of Mertoun and hers, or any of your fine lady acquaintances and theirs. You would not chide Elma for

prating morning, noon, and night of what goes on in Mertoun House. Yet you find fault with her"——

"Never, Piers!" emphatically.

"Not openly, ma'am: no; you are fond of Elma, and kind to her. I believe you really love her."

"Indeed I do." She was touched, and spoke earnestly.

"Yes: well, I know it. You do love her, and would not be unkind to her for the world, —but if she were any one else, any other human being, you would snub her unmercifully whenever she essays to mention Miss Exeter's name."

"I—I dare say I should." Even Lady Alfreton could not forbear a half-smile at this. Then she proceeded—

"But, Piers, who would not? Is there not something unsuitable, incongruous—I hardly know how to express myself—but *can* a person be in two sets of society at once? Can Elma come and live with us—(she is to live with us, you know; Sir Thomas has quite settled it in his own mind, and I rejoice that he has)—

but what I wish now to say is, can Elma come to us as our adopted daughter, become one of ourselves, be introduced to *our* friends, mix in *our* society, and play her part in *our* world, and at the same time keep up friendship and intercourse with all sorts of waifs and strays, with odds-and-ends of people whom she will never meet at the houses we frequent, who cannot do as we do, go where we go, and be as we are? Can she? I ask you that."

"And that is what I shall ask her," said Piers rising, "or rather I shall wait and watch, and see for myself. I have an idea that Elma both can and will."

CHAPTER XVI.

LADY MABEL'S BALL.

NOT many days after this it fell out that the weather changed, and from being clear and brilliant, turned to extreme heat, closeness, and haze. The whole atmosphere was charged with electricity.

It was drawing towards the end of the term in Miss Exeter's school; teachers and pupils alike were jaded and spent; it seemed as if it had needed but such oppression on the part of the elements to complete their woes.

There were but few amenities of the situation to be had. Cool nooks were impossible in the uncompromising rooms of the corner house; there were no shaded recesses, no permitted draughts—worse still, no iced drinks, no fans, nor smelling bottles! None, in short, of the

little aids to equanimity which under such circumstances would be sure to be found in the houses of the luxurious and wealthy.

There were no relaxations, moreover. Headache and languor were universal; but with all Miss Exeter's sympathy for the same—and she was herself a sufferer—she could not take them into account. The classes must go on; the lessons must be learned; the routine must proceed, or the whole house would be out of gear; and bravely struggling as she did with her own sensations, the excellent schoolmistress felt that in requiring others to do the same she was not exacting more than was her due.

The days went droning on: at length came one worse than all the rest.

"There's a storm in the air," observed Henrietta Grey. "I know by my head. It only aches like this when a storm is going on somewhere. Besides which, I hear the growl of distant thunder."

"How hot the house is!" cried another. "If we might only sit out, and do our lessons under the trees!"

"Do our lessons? No!" chimed in a third. "Go for a walk, say I."

"I could not walk a step," murmured Henrietta, her slender, willowy form bending wearily forward. "I know what I should like!"

All demanded what. "Another drive in that easy, delicious carriage. Oh, to roll on and on as we did that day, without having to move or think! I had not liked to say so to Miss Exeter, but just before it stopped for us, I had been feeling as if I really could not drag on another inch. We had walked a good deal already, you know, beforehand, and I was so tired. Oh, dear me, how delightful it was!"

"I dare say, but it is of no use thinking of that now," somewhat impatiently interrupted an auditor, who had not shared the pleasing experience. "Talk of things that are likely to happen—of things that we do occasionally have. There are no grand carriages going to stop for us when next we go out, I'll answer for them. As for that Lady Mabel—or whatever her name was—I dare say she has forgotten all about it by this time, and about you too."

"Has she, though?" There was a new voice and a new step in the room. "Wait a moment before you reply to that, Henrietta. Look here, Henrietta, and look here, Maggie," to the two elder girls, her own particular friends—"look here," continued Elma, who had entered whilst the last sentence was being spoken, "what have I got here?" producing three tiny envelopes, with a gilt coronet on each.

They sprang towards her.

"I have not opened mine," said Elma, handing one to each of the above-named recipients, "but I guess what I guess. Now look!—look!—look!"—turning in rapture from one to the other, and then pausing to draw a long, deep breath of expectation.

Each note contained an invitation to an evening party.

"It is Mabel's summer party," explained Mabel's friend, perceiving that the others were dumb with agitation and delight. "She is allowed to give one every year," proceeded the speaker, herself radiant, "and she told me some time ago that I was to be asked; but I never

knew that Henrietta and Maggie were to be asked as well, till I saw the notes just now. *Isn't* it nice? *Isn't* it beautiful? And *isn't* it kind?"

There could be no two opinions on the subject, and the envy of the younger and uninvited members of the community was felt to be so unreasonable, that even they themselves speedily changed it into sympathetic interest. When was the party to be? What was the hour named? What was the entertainment? And, most engrossing conjecture of all, What should each wear?

Henrietta's headache vanished as if by magic, while Margaret, who had been in something of a sullen mood, burst forth into sunshine under the touch of the magic Elma had brought.

Elma herself radiated sparkles on every side.

The whole dull room was transformed. Even the governesses, French and German, caught the infection, and became excited and demonstrative, feeling that something had happened which reflected credit on the whole establishment. Even

Miss Exeter coloured with pleasure and approval. Ways and means were discussed with an animation second to none which the annals of the corner house had ever before produced, and, in short, so effectually did the "coming event cast its shadow before," that every other shadow fled before it.

Three new dresses were indispensable. Elma indeed said nothing, when reminded cheerfully of the white frock which had been got for the flower-show, but she guessed how it would be when once the affair came to her aunt's ears.

A fairy fabric, woven by fairy fingers—in plain terms, a remarkably smart costume made by Lady Alfreton's own smart dressmaker, with fittings to match, was forthwith ordered to be sent to Haverstock Hill without delay; and that understood, neither Henrietta nor Margaret could be allowed to be behindhand. "I really think, my dears—ahem!—I think perhaps that for such an occasion, for such a very—ahem!—particular occasion, a point might be stretched," murmured Miss Exeter, suggestively. "If your parents could be consulted, my dear," to Henrietta, "I

am sure they would agree with me;—and—and as for Margaret, Margaret has had so little new this season, that—that"—and it ended in all three being turned out as nicely and prettily as even Lady Mabel herself could have been.

But there was a secret behind that too.

"Fanchette knows of a woman who will do splendidly, and quite cheap," Mabel had confided; for she was now to the full as much concerned as Elma was that her new friends should appear to advantage. "I thought perhaps you might not know of a good dressmaker; girls at school do not, as a rule, do they? You know your white frock isn't *quite* the thing, though it is very nice;" hastily, "but as you say Henrietta and Maggie are going to get new things, you tell them to go to this address; here it is," producing a piece of paper from her pocket; "she is Fanchette's cousin; French, too; so I know it will be all right. Fanchette answers for her."

"There, I told you," added she, when the time came, and there was a clustering of bright

faces and shimmering raiment in the ducal halls. "I told you that Fanchette knew. Why, Henrietta looks lovely! And how well that pale tea-rose colour suits her! She is like a tea-rose herself. Maggie's frock is very pretty too — very pretty. And as for you, Elma—why, I am nowhere," protested the delighted hostess, in gratified despair. "I did think I was not bad till you three came in. Now you must all enjoy yourselves. Mamma is delighted with you. Mamma always enjoys my parties; she wouldn't miss them for anything; but scarcely any of my brothers and sisters will even stop at home. Florence is here to-night, though. I believe she wanted to see what I was up to; well, never mind, there will be nothing for her to be ill-natured about. Here are my cousins, Louisa and Dorothy; and here are the boys;" and with a few frank words of introduction Mabel passed on.

Elma said afterwards that she had never missed one single dance, and Henrietta had only done so when really too much fatigued to go on.

Margaret, though less observed and attractive, had been perfectly content, and the hours had flown on winged feet with one and all.

It had been a scene of enchantment, a thing to be looked back upon. The lights, the music, the balcony curtained in, and redolent with fragrant flowers, the vast saloons well-filled with old and young, the fun over the old-fashioned dances—Mabel always would have old-fashioned dances at her party—and the going and coming along lofty galleries to the pretty supper tables —all had combined to form a rare remembrance.

There had been a cotillon, which Mabel's cousin had led. And he had been a nice, merry-hearted youngster, with no nonsense, according to her, about him.

"Bertie is splendid at everything," she had confided to her new friends, "and I have told him to see that you get some of the best things. He says he can't cheat,—but of course he can,—I mean he can *manage*. And he always does manage when I get round him. He says Henrietta is to lead one figure"—— And Henrietta,

inspired by the looks of all, had done it to admiration.

Each had borne away a pretty trifle, to be treasured perhaps for years, surrounded by a halo of exquisite association.

It had been well into the next morning ere that merriest of balls had broken up.

Who could have parted sooner? Nobody had wanted to go home at all.

"Oh, how shall we ever thank you!" had burst from Elma's warm young heart as she had bidden the duchess good-bye.

"It has been so very, very nice," Henrietta had added, with sparkling eyes.

"And every one has been so very kind," had murmured Margaret's shyer undertone. "Thank you; thank you."

The friendly duchess had been quite touched. "My dears, I am so pleased," she had responded from her heart. "Thank *you* all for thinking so much of the little we have done. So glad—so pleased that you have enjoyed yourselves. "*Good-bye*," pressing warmly each outstretched hand, "*Good-bye*."

"Three of the very nicest girls I have ever seen in my life," added she out loud, and (whether intentionally or no) before any one of the three had passed out of hearing.

The Duchess of Mertoun was a very kind woman.

CHAPTER XVII.

GOVERNESS AND PUPIL.

"MABEL," said her governess the morning after the dance, "what are you going to do with the bouquet you wore last night?"

"To do with it?" replied Mabel, rising up from the breakfast-table with a yawn. "Why, what should I do with it? I dare say it is fit for the rag-bag, but nothing else."

"If you are really not intending to make any further use of it," rejoined Mademoiselle Latour, as though she had half expected the reply, "would you have any objection to giving it me?"

"None in the world—if you have no objection to taking it—but you had better stop before you say 'Thank you,' that's all. Shall I fetch the beautiful bouquet?" and there was a faint

malicious smile on the young lady's face as she spoke.

Mademoiselle, however, did not perceive this. "I should be much obliged," she replied readily, and her pupil left the room.

In a few minutes she returned bearing a shapeless mass, only to be recognised as having been a hothouse bouquet by the bunch of white satin ribbon to which it was attached. Even Mademoiselle Latour uttered an exclamation. "I told you not to be too ready with your gratitude, Mademoiselle," said Mabel coolly. "As you wished for the bouquet, here it is; but I am afraid if you are desirous of wearing it at secondhand to-night it will hardly adorn you."

"Apparently not:" and Mademoiselle frowned, and bit her lip with such obvious vexation, that again a slight smile appeared on the watchful countenance before her. The pupil was not fond of her instructress, and neither one nor other was in the best of minds or tempers that morning. Late hours, excitement, and sweetmeats were having their inevitable reaction.

"What in the world have you done to the flowers?" sharply demanded Mademoiselle at length, with the impatience of disappointment; "they looked beautiful last night, and every one noticed how fresh they kept until the very last. You said it was because they had not been wired—because they had been sent off by your own gardener from the country; while now"—and she looked discontentedly at the withered, discoloured blossoms.

"You should have asked for them last night, that is all I can say," retorted Mabel pertly. "What I did with them I cannot say, but I know where I found them this morning—under the supper-table, with a bench upon the top. I went along to look for my fan, which I suspected had been dropped there, and I saw this," shaking the quondam bouquet, "so I thought you would hardly consider it much of a prize."

"No, indeed. Well, come to lessons; it does not signify. Get out the books; we are late to-day, as it is;" and Mademoiselle swallowed something like a sigh. "And this is Wednesday besides."

"Good luck that it is!" muttered Mabel, sitting down with all the reluctance induced by the previous night's gaiety for French verbs and German exercises. "If it were not Wednesday, I don't know how I should endure myself. What do you want the bouquet for, Mademoiselle?" she inquired suddenly, and more as an excuse for dawdling over the commencement of her tasks than from any real curiosity on the subject.

Mademoiselle hesitated; then, "It would not interest you," she said, at length; for she too was in a prickly humour.

"Of course it would." Instantly Mabel *was* interested, through a spirit of opposition. "Of course it would!" she persisted. "Why not? I want to know, and I am sure, Mademoiselle, you might tell me."

"Oh, I will tell you, if you care to hear." The governess paused again. "I have some friends," she began, in a softer voice, "whom I have known from childhood, a good pastor and his family, who have lately come to London from Switzerland, their home. The pastor has been sent by some deputation to attend meetings in

Exeter Hall, and he has brought with him his daughters—his wife is dead—to see the sights and enjoy themselves. Last week I took rooms for them, and they arrived. London is very different from what they expected. It is grander, finer, and very, very much larger. It is also much dearer to live in, and money goes a very little way. My friends are not poor people in Switzerland. They have a very pretty house and garden, and cows, and horses; there is a little farm attached. It was thought they could very well afford this little trip to England, and that they had quite sufficient to go everywhere, and see everything here. But they did not know this country. The lodgings I took for them have turned out so frightfully dear, and they are charged so ruinously for everything they eat, and for all the little extras, that they have had to move to very much smaller ones a great deal farther off. The weather has been so warm that they cannot walk, as they do at home; and besides that, they do not know their way, so that they have to take conveyances everywhere; and what with that, and the expense of

their tickets to all the shows, and getting their meals at *cafés*—for it is too far to go back for every meal—they have got through so much money already that they are quite frightened. Now they often stay at home nearly all day, or else just walk about in the streets near at hand, so as not to spend more. I go to see them this afternoon, and I take a little basket of fruit with me; and I had thought to take your beautiful flowers if"——

"Well, now, I *am* sorry," interrupted Mabel heartily. Her unfeigned interest in the recital, and the emphatic manner in which she had nodded her sympathy at each point, had led the narrator on to tell far more than she had began by intending to do; and the warmth of the present expression brought the colour to poor Mademoiselle's cheeks. Mademoiselle was not, as we have said, a favourite with her pupil, nor was she, it must be confessed, an amiable or interesting personage to the world at large.

Vain, self-engrossed, narrow-minded, and as a rule, alive only to her own side of every question,

it would never have been supposed either by Lady Mabel, or by any other member of the duke's household, that the governess would have been the one either to make an effort on behalf of others, or to put herself out of her way for their sakes. But surely the worst of us has some soft spot. It may be that as a child running about the green slopes of some Swiss châlet, the little foreigner had received loving kindness or tender nursing at the hands of the good pastor's parents; it may be that happy memories had clung round some such early years, and impressions had been received which neither time nor change had ever been able to efface; at any rate, there was something in the hard, little, black eyes now, which Mabel had never beheld in them before, and which went straight to her own warmer, honester heart.

"Poor soul! And I was laughing at her in my sleeve!" she thought, "laughing at her; and how should I like to be laughed at myself?"

Then she fell a-musing. Flowers? Of course

she could get Mademoiselle some flowers; and of course she should have as many as she could carry to take to her friends that afternoon; but after all, what were flowers?

All at once she felt as if she should like to do more, a great deal more, for Mademoiselle's *protégés*. Poor, unfortunate creatures! Stewing in a back lodging during the London season, and obliged to walk about the streets near at hand because they could not afford to go farther! "It is disgusting, people being so poor!" cried the duke's daughter to herself.

But all the same she must certainly put in her oar; having once tasted the sweets of doing kindness, it was not to be supposed that she should not embrace another, and such a favourable opportunity. But what was to be done?

"Thank you for your kind attention, Mabel," said Mademoiselle, almost cheerfully, for the confidence and its reception had done her good also. "Now we must get to lessons. Give me that book."

"Do you go after luncheon, or before?"

demanded Mabel abruptly, for on half-holidays the governess often disappeared before two o'clock.

"Not till afterwards to-day; my friends do not expect me to luncheon."

"And perhaps they would have no luncheon for you."

With the best intentions possible, the speaker had not the delicacy of feeling which made Elma Alfreton never say the wrong thing.

Mademoiselle, however, humbly acquiesced. She had said so much, had allowed so much already, that it was of no use now to uphold her pastor's dignity, and maintain that she could depend on hospitality at all times; and moreover, Mabel's inquiry, though bluntly expressed, was to the purpose, and appeared to bode something. The next moment it appeared what that something was.

"I am glad you don't go before," proceeded the young lady, with a sudden relaxing of the brow, as though a weight of care had been lifted from it, "because, you see, I could not do anything till then. But as soon as I get

to mamma I can do anything. Don't buy a basket of fruit, Mademoiselle. We have quantities. I know that they could not put all that was in the house on the table last night. As soon as ever lessons are over, I will go off to Mrs. Greenaway and hear what there is, and then I can just get mamma's leave and have a good basketful packed for you. But are you to carry it, Mademoiselle?" added she suddenly, a new perplexity arising.

"Oh, no fear about my being able to carry it," laughed Mademoiselle, delightedly. "Oh, thank you, Mabel, very, very much. That will be a treat! Your English fruit is so good. Why, they have no fruit like it in Switzerland! And the poor girls told me how they longed to taste whenever they passed the tempting windows. I do not suppose they have hardly had a strawberry, however."

"But how will you carry it," persisted Mabel, warming to the project more and more, "if it is a big basket, and I mean it to be a big basket?"

"I go by the underground railway, my dear:

you know Sloane Square Station is within five minutes' walk from this house, and when I get to Addison Road Station the pastor's lodgings are within a stone's throw."

"Addison Road Station! Where on earth is that, Mademoiselle?"

"A long way off, in West Kensington, as it is called. But it is not by any means a disagreeable part when one gets to it. The pastor's rooms are rather high up. They are at the top of the house, but they have a nice open view—at least for a town. Oh, they will do very well there," concluded Mademoiselle, now disposed to view the case *couleur-de-rose*. "And it is but for a short time longer. They will soon be going home again!"

("But without having had much fun out of their London season," reflected Mabel.)

CHAPTER XVIII.

"NOT EVEN A BIT OF PINE?"

F I were you, Mabel, I should not pursue that plate of raspberries all round the table with your eyes," whispered a teasing brother, at luncheon. "It is not of much use, I should say. Raspberries are very good. They won't come round to you."

To tell the truth, Mabel had taken such an open and conspicuous interest in the fruit at table, that poor Mademoiselle, who knew to what it was due, sat on thorns. It had been effort enough for her, being of a reserved disposition, to own to her pupil the bent of her thoughts that day;—but to have Mabel—as Mabel was quite likely to do—thrust the good pastor and his family upon the attention of

others, being disagreeably vociferous over them, and thus making her poor friends objects of repugnance, instead of pity, would be too much. She had indeed dropped a hint beforehand. She had murmured almost imploringly, as the two walked along to the dining-room, "Pray, dear Mabel, pray do not mention Monsieur Farel to any one." But she had had but small faith that her injunction would be heeded, if temptation to disregard it arose. Now she heard the brotherly taunt, and her fears started to life anew.

But strange to say, Mabel, who had begun to retort, checked herself. "I like the strawberries better," was all she said.

"Oh, indeed. Why then, may I ask, did you let them pass?"

"I don't think that dear Mabel looks quite herself this morning," interposed the fond mother. "I hope, my darling, you have not overdone yourself with your exertions last night? Perhaps you had better not have any fruit—certainly not, if you feel disinclined for it."

Poor Mabel! Fruit was the one thing she

felt she could eat. In truth, she *had* rather over-fatigued and excited herself on the previous evening, and cutlets and chickens were uninviting. But the strawberries, and fresh sweet-smelling grapes!

To her surprise and vexation, however, the dishes of these were by no means either so abundant or so well-filled as she had expected —(grapes and strawberries have a wonderful knack of diminishing in number when out of sight for a few hours, as every one knows) —and instead of the "heaps and heaps" of her imagination, there now only appeared a few rather so-so dishes full.

"Of course Mrs. Greenaway keeps back the best for dinner," Mabel sought to comfort herself. "I must get at Mrs. Greenaway afterwards, and wheedle her out of some she has laid by;"—but all the same, she felt a little anxious. When Mrs. Greenaway was very flush, there was wont to be a great profusion on the luncheon table, at which there was always a good deal eaten. People like fruit in the heat of the day; and besides the usual number

sitting down, there were sure to be several strangers present, when the family was in town. Accordingly there was some excuse for the wistful following of somebody's eyes, as the raspberry dish wended its way solemnly down the board.

Not one raspberry would Mabel herself touch, and with equal resolution she declined grapes and strawberries also.

"Not even a bit of pine?"

Mabel's papa had seized the pine—the one pine which had hitherto escaped ruthless hands—and now held it aloft.

Almost with a scream she started forward.

"Good gracious, child! What is the matter?" cried he, whilst divers attendant exclamations testified to the surprise of all the party. "Good gracious! What is it, child?"—knife in one hand, pine in the other.

"O papa!—O mamma, help me! Please don't cut it, papa, please don't! Mamma, you know what I want it for!" for already she had confided in the duchess, who had forgotten as fast as she had heard, though charmed and

approving as usual. "Please, mamma, ask him to give it to me;" and the young petitioner's face flushed up with anxiety and eagerness, while poor Mademoiselle, cold and sick, sat mute, with her eyes on her plate. What was coming next?

"Oh, Mabel wants to take a little fruit to some poor sick people," observed the duchess, running slightly off the rails in her statement; "and no doubt the pine would be just the thing for them, if no one else wants it."

"Oh, no one must want it, if Mabel does," observed Florence.

"Really, we none of us care about pine," proceeded the conciliatory parent. "I dare say it may be a treat to Mabel's people. Yes, my dear, you can take it; it is but a small one—but who is going to carry it for you?"

"Oh, Mademoiselle will. Mademoiselle knows where they live, and all about them. Mademoiselle"——

"Now it is all coming," groaned the wretched Mademoiselle in her heart.

But Fate befriended her. The door opened,

and newcomers were announced. They were *habitués* of the house, and could thus look informally in, wishing to find the party at home, in order to make some appointments and arrangements. Before they had taken their seats, Mabel and her governess had flown.

"And here it is," cried the former, hugging the disputed pine in ecstasy, as soon as the door had closed behind her. "Here it is, and how good it smells! When I saw there would be nothing else left, I set my heart upon the pine, and I watched to see if Horniman would whip it away to cut it. Isn't it a little beauty?" hurrying along. "Will they like it, Mademoiselle? Now go and get ready, and I will do what I can with Mrs. Greenaway. Anyhow, we have this: but still I think I ought to be able to manage Mrs. Greenaway too." And so well did she manage, and so thoroughly did she succeed in enlisting the old housekeeper's sympathies in the good cause, that Mademoiselle scarcely knew what to say, or how to be grateful enough, when presently

she came down equipped for her expedition, and saw the luscious display.

"She said that she could very well spare it," protested Mabel, in answer to a conscientious demur; "she was quite pleased to send it all, I assure you, Mademoiselle; and she said that mamma would have wished it—which of course mamma would. Now let us cover it up," busily doing this, "and down with the lid," running the bolt through, "and here it is, as neat as possible," surveying the little market-basket with which Mrs. Greenaway had further provided her, with a complacency which was almost as pleasing to her companion as the gift itself.

How much may the manner in which a kindness is done add to that kindness? Double, nay, treble it.

"I can let you out, you know," proceeded Mabel. "The men have gone to their dinner. Oh, how hot it is outside," as a glaring sunbeam shot into the cool, marble hall, on the opening of one huge side of the entrance door. "Oh, Mademoiselle, I am afraid you will not

enjoy your expedition. Put up your parasol, and I can give you the basket afterwards. I wish I could have got more flowers—there are one or two really good ones in this corner—but I was afraid to be found in the rooms, lest they should come out from luncheon and begin bothering again. So now we are all right. Good-bye. And mind you tell me all about it when you come home to-night."

CHAPTER XIX.

"I WAS THANKFUL WE HAD TAKEN NOTHING!"

AT length Miss Exeter's school broke up, and Elma was free. As a matter of course she went straight to Park Lane; and it had now become an understood thing that she was to accompany her uncle and aunt to their country seat, and indeed be with them, or be provided for by them, until her lessons were resumed.

But though it was the first of August, Sir Thomas Alfreton was still detained in town by an important debate in Parliament; and Lady Alfreton considered that she would take a fortnight by the sea before settling in B—— shire. Juliet had engaged to go yachting for a week at Cowes, and Piers was inclined to dawdle off by himself to realms unknown.

Elma could hardly stay behind alone with her uncle, and yet——

The question had barely arisen ere it was answered.

"I have had an invitation," announced the young visitor, with her own pretty blush—a blush which always accompanied anything Elma had to tell about herself, and her own affairs. "I—I was told to ask you about it, auntie. Mabel wants me to go to them for this fortnight, whilst you are away. I said I would ask you, auntie."

"Ah, yes, the duke is in town too," observed Sir Thomas.

"The very thing!" cried Lady Alfreton. "Delightful. What a fortunate friendship this has turned out." (Mabel having by this time been restored to favour, and the affair of the drive forgotten.)

"Of course you must go, Elma; of course. Write and say so at once—or stay, I will take you to Mertoun House myself this afternoon. I can go there as easily as anywhere else, and it would be only polite for me to thank the

duchess as well as you. A most kind thought. And really a very opportune one. You are a lucky girl, Elma; you two, you and Mabel, will lead the poor duchess a dance, I expect. But the duchess likes it. If only those elder daughters of hers would let her alone, she would be perfectly happy under Mabel's rule. I am always amused by her beatified expression," continued Lady Alfreton, laughing, "when she has fairly got rid of them all, and she and the duke and Mabel are off by themselves. Poor people! not to be able to manage their own children!"

"Humph!" said Piers, under his breath.

"You will need some new clothes, Elma," continued her aunt, in high good humour. "We must not let our niece be a little dowdy, when she is out visiting. I suspect we must go to Mrs. White again. You never looked so well in anything as in that frock for the dance. Well, we can take her on the way, and the things can go into my bill. A most happily-timed and convenient invitation, I must say."

And Elma thought so too when in a few days she was installed at Mertoun House.

"I think I have got something to do that you will like, Elma," said Mabel, as soon as the two were alone. "It is just the queer kind of thing you *will* like—for you are rather an odd girl, you know, as I always said you were; but I don't mind; we are all right together now, aren't we? And can say what we like to each other, can't we? Well, you will never guess where I want to go this afternoon!"

"Tell me, then," said Elma, promptly cutting the Gordian knot. "I should like to go *anywhere* this afternoon," she added, dancing up and down the room. "How delightful it is being here, just you and I, in this nice, great, cool place, with no lessons, and no governess, and no anybody! Are we to go by ourselves, or with anybody?"

"Just by ourselves in my own cart," said Mabel. "Tommy sits behind. Tommy comes from our own place, you know, and as we have known him since he was that high"—indicating

—"I am supposed to be quite safe with him. He is the best and trustiest Tommy in the world. And besides, he knows London from one end to the other. He knows where we are going to-day," nodding mysteriously. "I mean he knows the place, and how to get to it."

"Well?" cried Elma, on the tiptoe of expectation.

"We are going to Addison Road—Addison Road, Kensington. There now, are you any the wiser?"

"Not a bit."

Elma was very much the wiser, however, before the half-hour was over. Mabel was now full of the Swiss pastor and his family; all her best feelings had been called into play by Mademoiselle's account of the visit she had paid, as referred to in our last chapter; and so graphically had the governess portrayed the disillusionment of the poor, homesick, disenchanted foreigners, getting little good of the holiday which fancy had painted in such glowing colours, and only longing now to be far from the great, heated, noisy place, and back in

their own peaceful valleys and among their simple associates—that Mabel had since done nothing night and day but picture to herself the scene. "The daughters have not a human being to speak to, after their father goes out in the morning—at least very often they have not," affirmed she. "Their English is pretty fair, Mademoiselle says, but they are rather frightened about speaking it. And there should have been another pastor and his wife over here at the same time, who would have looked after these ones, and taken them about. But at the last moment those others could not come. There is one Frenchman who visits them occasionally; but he can only get away in the evenings, and it is just in the evenings when some one is least wanted. Their father can be with them then; and he generally takes them out for a walk, or something—but by day they are quite alone. They came for a month, and they have still another week, poor things!"

"Well, we must do what we can with that week," said Elma cheerfully. "We must find out what they like, and then we can manage."

"Is your French pretty decent, Elma?"

"Oh, I can talk—such as it is. We have to talk French at Miss Exeter's, you know. Always French during school hours."

"That's a comfort; mine is abominable. To tell the truth, one reason that I waited for you to go with me was because I thought you would do the talking."

Of course Elma giggled and retaliated, and Mabel defended and asserted, but both were too full of their mission to mind anything each other said. The pony-cart came round, and they set off.

We have no space to tell all the little details of that visit. Before starting, Mabel had produced all ready prepared, another present of fruit, but a dubious shade on her friend's brow made her pause to inquire whether it bore any interpretation.

"I think—don't you think, that as we are making a call, a regular call on—on young ladies, like—like ourselves," Elma suggested—"don't be vexed, Mabel—it was such a kind thought of yours—but, you see, it was just a

little bit different Mademoiselle's taking a present. She could take anything. But we—it does not seem as if we had quite the right. I know they would like the fruit of all things," she had added hastily, "and the flowers are so pretty too; but perhaps their *minds* would like it better if we went without, and just sat with them, and talked with them, for to-day; and then next time"——

"Why, I suppose you are right;" and Mabel had looked ruefully at the basket. "You seem to understand people; I don't. Every one says I make blunders, and say rude things. But you take me in hand, Elma, and you may make something of me yet. Anyhow, we'll go and make our call;" and she had sprung to the box-seat quite gaily. It must be owned that Mabel had a generous nature.

Nor did she doubt which of the two had been in the right for a single moment, after they had taken their seats in the glaring, dusty little parlour of the pastor's lodgings. The young ladies had to struggle with a good deal of surprise, and some reserve. They had to

explain who they were, and for what they had come. Mabel had to make a great deal of Mademoiselle Latour, and Elma of being Mabel's friend, and, in short, to have had to apologise for a basket of fruit and flowers, as well as for their own intrusion—they almost felt it to be an intrusion in the face of the half-affronted looks of their perplexed hostesses —would have been quite too much.

"I *was* thankful we had taken nothing!" cried Mabel afterwards. "The poor girls looked quite cross at us, till they understood. I dare say they thought we had no business to come. And I dare say they felt shabby too. They were dreadfully shabby, were they not, Elma? But we thawed them at last. I thought that the one you were talking to was going to cry! I did, indeed. Her eyes were full of tears. And she talked away quite pleasantly after that. My one said she had never been more miserable in her life. And she had come expecting to be so happy, and had looked forward to it for so long! Well, one comfort is, they shall have a good time now. Did you see how they looked

when I said we would take them out to-morrow? We can't have mamma's carriage this time, but we can have the inside car, or something of that kind. Tommy will arrange it. Well, then, when we have been to the Abbey, and to the House of Commons—don't let us forget to ask Uncle Robert for an order—they are to come in to tea with us—with you and me alone, in the schoolroom. We'll tell Mrs. Greenaway to send in a proper *tea-party* tea. And afterwards Tommy shall take them home in the cart. Now, is not that a nice plan altogether?"

CHAPTER XX.

THE GIRL AT MRS. THATCHER'S COTTAGE.

"IF Elma would be content with visiting the cottages now and then, and looking in at the school, I am sure I should not mind in the least," said Lady Alfreton, in plaintive accents, a few weeks later. "That is quite usual in the country; and though I am not a great cottage-goer myself, I have several friends who are. But Elma is really rather tiresome, poor child! She has a *penchant* for running after these curious sort of half-and-half people who are nobody's business; and though I know she would not do it if I desired her not, somehow it is difficult to make her understand the position. She has invariably some excellent reason for making friends with this one, and that one; and she is so particular

about having my consent beforehand—('I am sure Juliet was never half so particular,' parenthetically)—that I hardly know how to be vexed with her. And yet what am I to do if it goes on?" And the speaker raised her eyebrows and looked at her son. She and Piers were rather in the habit of discussing Elma at this period in their lives.

"What mischief has she been up to now?" inquired he.

"Well! Mischief? One can hardly call it that. But I will tell you. You know that pretty cottage up the honeysuckle lane, Mrs. Thatcher's cottage—the one with the green gate?"

"I know it."

"Mrs. Thatcher lets it during the summer months as lodgings; and very good lodgings I dare say they are. They seem always full. I often pass that way; and this year, ever since we came down, if the day is fine, I have noticed an invalid girl, in a chair outside, in the pretty garden. If it is at all cold, she is in the bay-window. You know the cottage is so near the

lane that one cannot help seeing right into it. Perhaps I should not have noticed the girl, however, if Elma had not called my attention to her, and every time we went by it was 'Oh, there she is!' so that at last she had quite established an interest for us both. It was really quite droll; for if Elma had chanced to be alone—you know the cottage is on the way to the vicarage?—Elma can walk there by herself, it is so close to our gates. Well, if I had not been with Elma, then she would always inform me whether the girl were in or out, as if it were a matter of the first importance! Well, I really could not help getting interested," continued Lady Alfreton, laughing. "You know Elma has a way of interesting one in spite of one's self; and absurd as it may seem, I used to catch myself wondering on a doubtful day whether this girl, of whom I knew absolutely nothing, would be able to sit out-of-doors or not." He nodded attention.

"However, this was all very well," proceeded his mother, "it was a little joke between Elma and me, and I never supposed it would be any-

thing more: but what do you think? About a week ago she flew in, blushing, you know, as Elma does when she has anything particular to say, and suggested would I call on the mother of the girl at Mrs. Thatcher's cottage? I must do Elma the justice to say," proceeded the speaker, "that she had found out *something* about the people: that they were cousins, I believe, of Mr. Bryant, our new curate; an excellent young man, whom Sir Thomas had a great hand in bringing here—but that does not mean that we are to be saddled with *all* Mr. Bryant's relations, does it? Then it appeared that Elma had met the invalid—'our girl' as she called her—at the vicarage that afternoon; and, in short, had run up an acquaintance with her, actually fancying that I would be as much delighted and excited as she was herself! What could I say? It would have been cruel to have let her know that I wished she had done nothing of the kind. So ever since there have been goings and comings, and lending of books. and takings of flowers—and though I did *not* give in to going myself, for I told Elma posi-

tively that it would not do for me to be calling on Mrs. Thatcher's lodgers, for that if I did it one year, it would be expected of me the next, and ever after—still I did not like to refuse her permission to go. I dare say they are nice people,"—— and she paused and looked to see what her auditor thought.

"So Elma visits them now?" was, however, all he said.

"Well, she got Juliet to go one day," owned Lady Alfreton. "I told Juliet she had better, and that she might make some sort of excuse for me—I am really not very strong just now, and quite exhausted with the long season in town —so, as Juliet seemed rather to fancy going with Elma—you know she will do anything to be amused—I thought she might as well pay the little attention."

"You are a great deal better than you would make out, ma'am."

"What?" exclaimed Lady Alfreton. She felt as if her ears had deceived her. The last part of the above had been delivered for the express purpose of covertly apologising to her son, of

whom she stood in considerable awe, for a hitherto unheard-of civility on the part of herself and her daughter.

"We shall get on better now," continued Piers slowly. "If Elma will lead the way, and if we follow in her steps, we shall yet redeem our name in the county, perhaps. Don't you see, ma'am—but no, I don't suppose you do see, or at least you never have seen—that we are not popular as a family. And why should we be? We never do anything for anybody. We never concern ourselves with our neighbours in any way"——

"Why, Piers, we ask them"——

"To an election dinner, and an election ball. We don't *call* those exquisite festivities by that name; but our guests know, and we know, and all know that they know what is their real meaning. You go round once a year, and leave cards on a list of people which my father draws up; but unless a vote is of considerable importance, you don't go near a single house in the place."

"I do indeed—I go to the vicarage"——

"Oh, to the vicarage? yes; a vicar is every-

body's man. It would not be decent not to be on good terms with the vicarage people—but is there anybody else? Think it over, ma'am, for I have done so, and in my own mind I am pretty sure that there is *not;* is there any one, I say, with whom we can be said to have any kind of easy, pleasant, neighbourly intercourse? When I go to other country houses I meet all sorts of nice people—I don't say smart people—I don't say that they have all the London slang at their fingers' ends—but nice people—sensible, well-bred people, a thousand times better bred than many we find in 'society'—and I say again, why don't we have them here? Why must we look upon the Towers as a sort of desert island, unless we can fill it with our own set from town?—Why"——

"But, my dear Piers, you—I—you know yourself that country neighbours are not exactly—interesting?"

"I don't know, indeed; I know nothing about them. I am beginning to wish I did. I think we have been fools all through;" and he paused gloomily.

"The mother and daughter are coming to walk in the garden this afternoon," murmured Lady Alfreton, with what seemed an irrelevant return to her former topic, but which was, as a matter of fact, the outcome of her confusion upon undergoing so strange and unexpected a fusilade. "Juliet said she thought it would be kind, and they seemed pleased. We shall give them tea, I—I suppose?" She had supposed nothing of the kind the minute before, and had indeed stipulated for her own entire absence from the scene previous to allowing the invitation to be issued, but something in the present state of the social atmosphere caused her hastily to amend her resolution. "I am sure, Piers, if you think anything can be done?" she added suggestively.

"I don't see why it should not, ma'am."

"But how—in what way?"

"You know how, better than I; or rather, we are all ignorant together."

"Then what are we to do? How are we to begin? I suppose—yes, I think there is something in what you say. Indeed, Sir Thomas has

more than once hinted at the same of late; but I—really, what with being so much away from here"——

"Why should you be so much away?' That is at the root of the whole matter; if you took more *interest* in the place—and I am sure it is pretty enough, and nice enough—look at your grounds and your gardens"——

"But what should I do for society?" cried she, disconsolately. "All the grounds and the gardens in the world will not make up to me for the lack of human beings to talk to and mix with."

"Exactly what I am proposing to remedy. Make friends here; make your home here; don't look upon the old place as a sort of *pis aller* to fall back upon, when nothing better offers; persuade my father—I suspect he would be amenable to persuasion—to give up wintering abroad"——

"Oh dear!"

"And going so early in the year to town"——

"Oh *dear!*"

"Pass at least half your time in your own

beautiful home, and be at pains to care for it, to know about it, and to love it. There, ma'am, that is my advice; and though you may be surprised at it, I believe if you would give it a trial, you would find it good."

"And you?" demanded his mother suddenly. "What should you then propose to do? If—if we did think of altering our style of life in the manner you suggest, would you give up anything also? Should we see any more of you than we do now? Would you winter here with us?"

He thought for a second.

"Ah, I fancied not, Piers."

"You are wrong, ma'am; I did but pause to consider. It would have to be no half-and-half measures, you understand. If we were to make up our minds to live here, we should have to live among other people, and as they do. I should bring my hunters here from Leicestershire; my father would have to add a wing to the stable; I should shoot, and ask men down to shoot; and you and Juliet would go about to one house and another, and take an interest in all that

goes on. And you would get up things, and do your part in the neighbourhood."

"Certainly that would be better than doing no part at all." Lady Alfreton was herself brightening at the idea.

"And at Christmas time we should not merely send down subscriptions and blankets, but we should be here, here in the thick of everybody, entertaining and feasting? Rich and poor, you know? Tenants and non-tenants?"

"Ye-es—I suppose so."

"And—but I think you understand; and it is a bargain. If you and my father think it worth the trying, I will go in for it with you. Speak to him about it. To my mind our whole plan of life stands in need of a reform, and we cannot begin too soon."

Then he paused, and added with a half smile, "But it strikes me you have begun already."

"Begun? How?"

"Look there." He pointed to the flower-beds beneath the window where he stood, among which a bath-chair was slowly being wheeled, while a little group paced alongside.

"Oh, it is Elma's people!" cried Lady Alfreton, in something of a flutter. "Dear me! Well, I am glad the afternoon is so fine. She could not have come if it had not been fine, you know. The doctor said she was never to be out, if there were any chance of rain. But to-day is quite safe—and the flower-beds are really at their best. So that is the mamma," with unfeigned interest. "Poor thing, she looks delicate too. I—Juliet is there—but still perhaps I ought to go down. I dare say they would think it civil. I think I will go down. Shall I go down, Piers?"

"Ah, ma'am, do I not tell you that you are better than you make yourself out?" said Piers, quite affectionately. "Come along;" and to her infinite amazement he added, "I am going with you."

CHAPTER XXI.

A LINK DISCOVERED, AND REFORM BEGUN.

AND you really knew him? You knew my poor, dear brother Randolph, whom we lost three years ago!" exclaimed Lady Alfreton, half an hour later; "oh, how glad I am to have met you! I little knew —I little expected—it is so strange that by such a mere accident I should have heard all this! My dear, dear brother! He was the only one I ever had, Mrs. Mansell, and his death was" (her voice fell still lower) "the greatest sorrow of my life. We were all in all to each other."

The silence which followed was respected by her companion. The two elder ladies were pacing the garden paths, apart from the rest, and their conversation had become of so engrossing a nature that neither cared to break it. Lady Alfreton now learned that the unobtrusive

occupants of Mrs. Thatcher's cottage were people to whom she must ever be bound by a sacred tie; not only had the brother of whom she spoke been an intimate friend of Mrs. Mansell's late husband, but the two had lost their lives in the performance of the same military duty, and had fallen side by side. Of this no one had thought her ladyship—cold, selfish, dignified, as she was usually supposed to be in her own parish—would care to hear; and least of all would the two sensitive, shrinking strangers have chosen to push themselves into her notice on the strength of it. They had known, of course: but it was not until Lady Alfreton with unwonted cordiality had accosted the little party in the garden, and had, in her best manner, expressed her pleasure at seeing them there, her opinion about the weather, and her hopes that all would come into the house presently, that Mrs. Mansell could overcome her repugnance towards making any revelations. But she had found it impossible to be silent, when every look and tone of her hostess awoke memories of another; and the result had more than justified

the confidence when it had at length been made. We need not enter into the conversation which had followed.

"I am sure I shall never be grateful enough to my niece for having brought us together," said Lady Alfreton at length, pressing the hand she held with animation. "I am such a poor neighbour, but I hope—I trust—I really intend to be a better one in future. My son," with a smile, "has already been scolding me for unsociable habits to-day; and we have agreed between us that hitherto we have been keeping ourselves altogether too much to ourselves. I hope we shall often see you and your daughter here, at any rate."

"You are most kind."

"I must tell you," continued Lady Alfreton, with the utmost vivacity, and a decided inclination to prolong the chat, "that we, Elma and I, had for some time observed your daughter out and about in her invalid chair, and taken an interest in her progress towards recovery. But I did not call—it was difficult for me to call"——

"Oh, we did not expect it, Lady Alfreton."

The visitor did not say why they had not expected it; that it was because the lady at the Towers was never known to set foot within any doors save those of the grandest and proudest of the county magnates, on other occasions than on the solitary round of state visits to which Piers had referred. Mrs. Mansell would fain indeed have declined the ungracious permission which, even when delivered in Juliet's dulcet tones, had sounded hardly courteous: but she had looked at the pale face and drooping form by her side, and had seen Caroline brighten, and smile, and cast loving glances at Elma, and pride had been set aside in her heart.

She had meant to hug her secret close, however. She would not trade upon it, not even for Caroline's sake—but would return as she went, a humble, unknown individual, to her cottage lodgings.

But now—now she could not but own that it had been well she came.

The face of everything had changed.

Once thawed and melted, no one understood the fine art of fascination more than did her present hostess, and no chord within Lady Alfreton's

bosom could have been touched to bring forth her better nature more entirely, than that on which her gentle guest had placed her finger.

Her dead brother had been the person most beloved by her in all the world whilst he lived, and his death, as she had herself owned, had been the one real sorrow of her life.

CHAPTER XXII.

"YOU ARE A LIVING SHAME TO US ALL."

ELL, young sage, it strikes me that you have done a very fair day's work," quoth Piers Alfreton that evening, he and Elma being alone in the big bay-window of the drawing-room before dinner. "Are you tolerably satisfied with it yourself?"

"Was it not strange, Piers?" Elma was glowing all over in the sunset which illuminated the heavens without, and the two figures within.

"Was not what strange?" said he, settling down for conversation; "you always are full of strange and wonderful things, I think: adventurous coincidences and encounters meet you at every turn. What was strange about to-day, eh?"

"About your Uncle Randolph, of course. Why, did you not hear?"

"Oh—ah—yes; yes, that was what fetched my mother, certainly. Nothing else would have done the business half so thoroughly. To be sure, she had gone down meaning to do the civil beforehand; but I am sure I could scarcely believe my eyes when I saw her and the widow walking backwards and forwards hand in hand!"

"Were they really?" Elma was dimpling with delight.

"Give you my word they were! And I am not sure that they did not kiss at parting. I won't take my oath on that, mind; but if not, they were near it—very near it. Oh, my mother does the thing handsomely, once she is wound up to doing it at all; and, as I say, my Uncle Randolph fetched her. But you were the motive power in the first instance, all the same, Elma."

"Why, Piers, no! I had nothing to do with it. I only got auntie's leave to take Caroline a few old books out of the schoolroom! Caroline

had read over and over every book they had brought with them, and of course they could not get any more here, although Mrs. Thatcher did offer the *People's Friend* and the *Family Circle*," added she, laughing. "But I never thought Aunt Selina would have asked them up here," continued Elma, recovering herself, "because of course she can't ask everybody, as she says. And though Mr. Bryant is so very nice, still he might have ever so many relations here at the village, as auntie says. And then for auntie to come down herself! Was it not very, very kind of her?" He cast a lazy eye round. For once he wondered if Elma could possibly be in earnest. He saw she was.

"What do you think?" he responded, accordingly. "Would it have been very, very kind on the part of my mother, to have thrown out a bare permission to a lady as well-born and well-bred as herself to patrol her garden, underneath her very windows, and then never to have gone near her? I must say I rather wondered at the widow's coming upon such an invitation."

"I do not think she would have come," owned

Elma, "if—if it had not been for Caroline. I think, Piers, she did a little—just a little feel it, you know. And when Juliet began, and I saw her face, I felt hot and cold all over; but Juliet did not see it at all. And Caroline wanted so dreadfully to see our flowers; she is quite crazy about flowers, and they have only roses and sweet-peas at Mrs. Thatcher's. Caroline said she had often and often looked through the gates, and wondered what was on the other side of the beech hedge; so that I think her mother felt she really could not help saying 'Yes,' for her sake. How they will talk about it all to-night," continued Elma, musing; "I wish I could hear them! Caroline will tell about us—you, and Juliet, and me; and about the fish-ponds and the vineries, and the rose walk, and your pushing her up that long path to get the view from the top; and Mrs. Mansell will tell all that auntie said, and how surprised she was about your Uncle Randolph. How I should like to be there!"

"Better than being here?"

"Oh, I did not say that," said Elma in-

nocently. "I did not mean *that*, Piers: but it *is* nice, you know, to follow people home in your own mind, and think it all out. And Caroline need never fear that she will be lonely again; for Aunt Selina says she does not at all mind *now* my going to see her whenever I like; and I may take my drawing, and sit in the garden. How funny it will be! To see *me* where we have so often seen *her!* If auntie were to come driving by when I am there, I will run to the gate and say, 'She is out to-day;' for you know we always used to say to each other when we got near the cottage, 'Will she be in, or will she be out?' I used to make auntie guess, and she very often guessed right."

"Well, but you won't have so much time for Caroline after your other dear friend, Mabel Pomeroy, arrives. When does she come? Monday? Caroline will have to go to the wall then, eh?"

"Piers!" indignantly.

"Won't she?" repeated he. "Mabel won't find Caroline much fun."

"If Mabel were the girl to think about that, she would never be *my friend;*" and the speaker drew herself up with an air of state, amusing to some one else. "You do not know Mabel, or you would never have so much as thought of such a thing! Caroline's being so poor and ill, and—and rather depending on me, are just the very things to make Mabel like her. Mabel is as kind and nice"——

"Hey-day! We have come on since the day of the flower-show!"

"I did not know her then; how should I? We had only seen each other for the first time that day. And my head was full of my own girls."

"And you thought she behaved shabbily to them."

"So she did—but we all did. *You* know. It would never be like that again. When Henrietta and Maggie went to her party—I told you how kind she was to them—I think she took more care of them and put them more forward than any one else; I am sure she did, just because they were strangers and knew nobody, and Mabel was so dreadfully

afraid they would not enjoy themselves. And then there were Mademoiselle's people."

"Who were they? I did not hear of that."

"Oh, that was when I was stopping at Mertoun House. I have not seen you to talk to since, you know. Mademoiselle—that is Mabel's governess—had some rather miserable foreigners on her hands, who had come over here, and did not know how to manage for themselves; and Mabel and she got to be quite friends over them, (they used to be always quarrelling before); and now Mademoiselle is so touched and overcome by all Mabel has done one way and another for these poor people—and they really were rather tiresome, and not very interesting people, Piers —that I don't see how she is ever to have the heart to give Mabel a bad mark for her lessons again!"

"Mabel scores there."

"You don't think she did it for *that?*"

"Good gracious, no! Don't, pray don't crush me with your scorn, my dear, determined, eloquent little spitfire! Why, what a defender of the faith you are, Elma! I wish I were

Mabel! What a thing it is to be believed in!" and he heaved a sigh, and shot a glance to mark the effect.

In vain. She was still a child; and still—yes, still a perfectly unsuspecting, perfectly unconscious one. Heedless of him, she was pursuing her own thoughts.

"You would hardly know Mabel, she is now *always* doing kind things and planning kind things. It began with her driving those girls and me in the park. That must have been the beginning, for she told me afterwards that she really believed that it was the very first time she had ever tried to do anything—any *real* thing—for anybody in her life! Just fancy! And she said besides—I wonder if I might tell you what she said besides?" And the animated young voice faltered and fell. Evidently something serious was coming.

"Don't tell, if you think you should not," said he.

"But I don't think that, and it would show you what Mabel really is, and I know you do not much like her."

"Well?"

"She said she cried herself to sleep that night."

"Cried herself to sleep!"

"She felt so ashamed. And it *was* strange, you know, just a little strange never to have tried to do anything."

"Strange to your ears, I dare say. Not quite so strange to mine, nor, I fancy, would it be to a good many others. The only strangeness would be in the crying over it."

"Now *that* I don't think strange at all," said Elma softly.

"No, because"—— and he stopped, drew a long breath, and looked away from her, as though scarcely knowing whether or not to proceed.

"Because why?" said Elma, all earnest attention. "Do tell me, Piers. I never mind what you say, Piers. Is it about Mabel?"

"No."

"Then about me?"

"Yes."

"Well, what about me?" And Elma took his hand, and wagged it up and down confidingly. "What about me?"

"Do you always take people's hands like that?" said he. But she felt that he took hold of hers as he spoke, and held it fast.

"Oh yes—when I like them."

"Do"—— then he put the rein upon himself.

"Well, now, what about me?" said Elma coaxingly. "Do say. I don't mind. I want to hear. Do say, Piers."

"Shall I say?" Somehow he knew that he ought not to say, and yet the temptation was great.

"Shall I tell you why you are astonished at Mabel, and why you would be astonished at others—at us—at half the people you meet? It is because you, Elma, are different from us all. It comes as naturally to you as the breath of heaven to be humble, modest, innocent, unassuming, unselfish. Selfish? you don't know what the word means. I tell you, you don't. The hopes, the fears, the pleasures and the pains of others are to you as if they were your own. Every one loves you—because you love everybody. You, a poor motherless girl, reared in a dry, barren soil—among strangers

—one of many—a mere unit in this great noisy world, you are a living shame to us all. Your pure, sweet, noble nature makes us all despise our mean, contemptible selves. The mere being with you—seeing you—hearing you"——

"O Piers! Piers, *don't!*" It was almost a cry.

"Hush. Hear it for once."

"No—no."

"Yes, for once, dear child. I will never speak so again, unless—." He stopped short.

"No, you must not—you must not."

"*Unless*——," he repeated. He said no more.

CHAPTER XXIII.

"NOW, I WONDER IF THAT BLUSH MEANT ANYTHING!"

IT was perhaps a little hard on Elma that her cousin Piers' suggestion of his parents passing more of their time at their country seat should have been carried out as fully as it was.

She had, in consequence of the resolution, to do without her "Park Lane days"—days which had become dearer to her than ever, since such a subtle change had crept over the once selfish and jaded household that even she could perceive the improvement; she had to be deprived of her Wednesdays in their society until the Easter of the following year.

Christmas, it is needless to say, she had spent at the Towers, and it had been a Christmas of enchantment; but during all the somewhat dis-

consolate spring months which had followed, and indeed up to the very end of April—for Easter was unusually late that year—Wednesday morning never failed to be greeted with a sigh.

Elma was however, as we know, of a nature so happy, that dulness could not oppress nor disappointment embitter it.

Since the best was not to be had, she would make all she could out of the second best; and in working diligently at her tasks, and making progress in various elegant accomplishments with the zeal and enthusiasm by which she was characterised, time sped quickly enough.

As prophesied, false hems—the modern substitute for the letting down of tucks, which was in vogue thirty years ago—had had to be resorted to in the case of our young lady's frocks. A good inch and a half had been added to her height, her complexion had grown more delicate, her shape had improved. In every way she had become less of a child—more of a woman.

"And quite time too!" pronounced Lady

Alfreton approvingly, as her eye at a glance took in the *tout ensemble.* "You were seventeen last month, Elma; that means that about this time next year you will be presented, and brought out. I intend to present you and bring you out myself. It is time that you should begin to look womanly; not quite so—so plump and chubby," laughing. "It is too bad of me to say so, is it not, love? But there is really nothing to mind. You were a very dear child, if you were a child; and I know Piers for one always admired the roses in your cheeks, and your look of fine health altogether. He has been quoting you to Juliet, and getting her to ride and walk so much, and to be out-of-doors so much, that really she looks as much younger as you do older since Christmas. Even at Christmas she had improved, you thought. And she is certainly more amiable, and has better spirits than she used to have. We have had quite a pleasant winter, and Sir Thomas is delighted. In spite of our having given a ball, and endless dinner parties, and had a good many people down from time

to time, we have not spent half as much as we usually do when we go to Cannes and Paris. He thinks our stopping quietly at home has made a good impression on the county too." Lady Alfreton ran on, for she was wont to say that she could always run on comfortably with Elma; Elma was such a sensible girl for her age, and so sure to understand. "I dare say it will end in our wintering at the Towers always; and I am sure I for one should not mind it at all. You know that Piers brought all his horses from Leicestershire, and hunted with our own packs? That also was pleasant. That was a great help. In short, we got on admirably, and I am sure that we have come up to town all the better for it."

It was undeniable that part of the pleasure of the retrospect lay in the conclusion; and Elma, with her whole soul brimming over with delight from the same cause, could find no fault with her aunt. That her dear ones had come up to town at all, for better for worse, was almost enough; but that they had come re-invigorated, cheerful, in good case all round,

brisk and bright for the coming season, was all that was needed to fill up the measure of her cup.

"And you *are* grown, Elma," repeated her aunt.

"Oh yes, auntie; Piers must measure me again. I could not help running in to see my old measurement, as I passed the library, and I am sure—certain—it is very little higher than my eyes are now."

"And though you *are* certainly slighter, you look well. You *are* well?"

"Quite well; perfectly well, auntie."

"Miss Exeter must have taken good care of you." And then, wonder of wonders, as if it were quite a natural sequence, Lady Alfreton added, "I think I must call on Miss Exeter, and express our approval."

She had called on so many people since we saw her last, that one more or less was of little consequence, and Miss Exeter was not more out of her own order than many others had been.

The experiment suggested by her son had, as we have heard from herself, been an un-

qualified success. She had found that to be civil, kind, and neighbourly, did not necessarily entail contamination, nor even continual intercourse. By degrees her eyes had opened to the fact that it was possible to pay an attention to—nay more, to pass quite a pleasant half hour with homely folks, who knew little or nothing of the world she lived in, but whose own world was nevertheless one which she could not despise. She even began to learn from them.

"Poor Mrs. Smith was here to-day, and really so interesting in her talk, and so humble and modest about herself—though it is quite *wonderful* what she has done, and makes one feel quite *ashamed*," she had protested on one occasion, "that I am sure I shall never even *think* of her as vulgar again. Indeed I quite forgot her little peculiarities while she was here, and —and after all, one ought not to mind so very much about them. I asked her to come again; I did indeed; I quite liked having her."

Again it had been: "My dear Piers, if I had known the early history of that poor, dear,

dreadful man you brought here the other day, I am sure I should never have behaved to him as I did. I feel so vexed with myself now. Do you know it? Have you heard it? No? Then let me tell you." Whereupon details had followed, surmounted by this conclusion: "So if you ever choose to ask Mr. —— here again, Piers, I will do my best to counteract the impression; and even if I do not understand all he says, for his speech is, you know, almost *impossible*, I will smile and say something, no matter what, to put him at ease."

Piers' "No one can do that better than you, ma'am," had been a little extra reward for this.

But in truth Lady Alfreton had needed no other reward than her own happier feelings. Every little effort had borne its own fruit; and her husband's and son's approbation, together with Juliet's amused acquiescence, had only made her path a little smoother than it might have been. Having once begun to tread in it, she would not easily have now been turned aside.

Sir Thomas had raised his eyebrows, but he

had also rubbed his hands over the change. He too, he had vowed, would turn country gentleman, as his son was doing. It was not yet too late: it would do both his health and his reputation all the good in the world.

At Christmas the Towers had hardly known itself, as night after night carriages had rolled to and fro; and according to Elma, there had been something or other "delightful"—"delightful" entertainments for both rich and poor, and even for the luckless "betweens"—erst her aunt's special horror, and her own special charge—always going on. Even Juliet had discovered that to be neighbourly was not such bad fun after all; and that people did not "encroach," and "push forward," and "hang on," as she and her mother had been used to believe they would.

"Of course we had now and then to pull up, and be a little stiff and frigid," she confided to her intimates subsequently, "but really on the whole I think we got on admirably. And I must own that if one *is* to live in the country, one had better not be as disagreeable as we used to be."

It is almost needless to say that among those who had benefited most were Mrs. Mansell and her daughter. *They* had been turned into friends; and indeed found the Towers so hospitable and agreeable, that it had ended in their accepting Sir Thomas's offer of a cottage he had to let within easy distance of his own house; and no one had been better pleased with this arrangement, nor more solicitous that everything about that cottage should be elegant and complete, and exactly what she would have liked for herself, than had Lady Alfreton.

It now seemed to her the simplest thing imaginable to say, "I think I must call on Miss Exeter."

Miss Exeter was seated in the front drawing-room on the following afternoon, expecting her visitor. She had been informed of the honour proposed to be conferred on her, and Elma had felt a little shy as she had done this. Elma had added, from herself, her conviction that the call would not be delayed.

The hint had been sufficient. All was now in readiness, and all was outward calm; though

to be sure, within the bosom of the gentle watcher, there was no small stir.

What might this strange and unexpected departure mean? Were Elma's guardians about to suggest any change, any compromise? Was Sir Thomas seeking to find some means by which he might at length effect what for some time past she had feared he and his desired, namely, to withdraw her beloved charge permanently from her care? In another year he would be free to do so; but now—and Miss Exeter shook her head, and her lips locked themselves fast together. No, no; anything but that. Whatever else might be requested or desired, whatever she could with a good conscience agree to, she would; but hand over her sacred trust to others, bend to the living rather than respect the wishes of the dead? Never!

"It will come soon enough—soon enough," sighed she, reflecting on the fleeting months. "My sweet Elma, you will not have much more of your quiet life and peaceful studies. The world will claim you. Oh, my darling!"

and tears stood in the faithful creature's eyes, "Oh, my Elma, that you may be able to live in the world and not be of it!—but—*can* that be?" For good Miss Exeter was a little faithless and spiritless at the moment, and who can blame her?

The next moment the door flew open, Lady Alfreton stepped in, and the little schoolmistress, all warrior again, stepped forward. Her demeanour indeed faintly surprised the visitor, who, being of an easy nature, had forgotten as entirely as though it had never existed that there had ever been any reason why the two should not now be on the best of terms. But it was Miss Exeter's turn to be surprised before the interview was over.

Not one syllable of a suggestion. Not a hint of change. Nothing, in short, but pleasantness, praise, and pretty compliment, expressed as Lady Alfreton alone could express herself.

"Dear me!" cried the mollified and repentant Miss Exeter, when once more alone. "Dear me! Elma is certainly right, and I have been as certainly wrong in my estimate of that charming

lady. Elma is wiser than I. She must teach me—not I, her—some things."

In the delighted co-operation of the good-natured Duchess of Mertoun, Lady Alfreton had also a continual support and argument in favour of the new state of things.

"What the duchess does, I may do," would be her decisive reply when Juliet would now and again suggest that Park Lane was not the Towers, and that what was very well for B——shire, was hardly the thing in London.

Lady Alfreton did not add—did not perhaps know—that what the duchess did was in nine cases out of ten the result of the change in the administration within her own family; that where Mabel led, Mabel's mother would follow—and we know who took the lead of all.

"It is Elma—all Elma!" was the conclusion of one who also knew.

But Piers did not trust himself to see much of Elma that summer. He was off on a long foreign tour, soon after the move to town was made; and if it be fair to cast an eye into the limpid depths of an innocent heart, we may

suspect that his youthful cousin felt as if half the brightness had gone out of everything when he had left.

Her "Park Lane days" were never from that time what they had once been—what they had especially been during the first few weeks after that happy Easter-tide. She always missed something. The hours were shorn of their glamour. A glory had passed away from them.

One day Lady Alfreton said suddenly, "O Elma! I have a letter from Piers. He sends you his love. Quite a new thing for Piers to do; but you were always a favourite." Then turning the epistle over in her hand, she began to read, murmuringly and at length louder, "Your affectionate son, Piers Alfreton. 'Give my love to Elma.'" Then holding out the letter, "There, you see! There it is! 'Give my love to Elma.'"

Afterwards the speaker thus held conference with herself—

"Now I wonder if that blush meant anything, or not. I wish it did—with all my heart I wish it did. But Elma always blushes. She blushes

both when she is shy and when she is all animation. Still—I wonder—I cannot help fancying that I have never seen any blush quite like that one before."

CHAPTER XXIV.

CONCLUSION.

IT was a merry spring day, a joyous bird-singing, flower-bursting April morn, but there was a-weeping and a-wailing in the corner house on Haverstock Hill.

It was the breaking-up day before the Easter holidays; a day upon which it was usual for a feeling of quiet satisfaction and decorous hilarity to pervade the establishment—but who now could be joyful? Elma was going. Elma would never more be found with her eager, welcoming face awaiting each return, the vacation over—having herself been the first to reappear.

Elma would never again be there to sweeten the inevitable moment, and do the honours to any fresh arrivals; Elma with her winning ways,

and adroit, persuasive tongue, and enthusiastic *esprit-de-corps* (the latter had told with every member of the household, from the oldest to the youngest)—Elma was leaving them all for evermore. True, others of her age, her contemporaries, the tall Henrietta and sober Margaret, before alluded to in these pages, had already departed, and others had taken their places; and it was time—yes, they could not but own it was time—that Elma Alfreton, who was now as those others had been, on the threshold of womanhood, should also float upwards into a higher, wider sphere. But still—Elma! who could replace Elma? The moving spirit of the household? Its own bright, particular star?

"Miss Exeter feels it awfully," whispered one to another, with bated breath. "She says nothing—but she does. You see it is almost like giving up her own child, and not giving her up to her parents either."

"I know one thing, we shall all fare the worse," replied the other, mournfully. "There will be no one now to manage Miss Exeter on her glum days, and bring her round again, as

Elma could always do. Elma could *always* bring her round. I hate to think of what the place will be like without Elma."

So did more than she.

Good Miss Exeter, respected by all, and liked in a measure by most of her pupils, was not perhaps the person of all others to be in sympathy with them. She could, as we have seen, unbend, and more than unbend on occasions,—but in her normal state the worthy schoolmistress fell into the not uncommon snare of a too rigid adherence to a principle. With her it was a principle that the performance of a set round of duties, varied by set recreations and indulgences, ought to, and infallibly must, satisfy the cravings of every right-minded, rational, responsible human being.

But girls in their teens (start not at this, fair readers of *Atalanta!*) can hardly be ranked among rational, responsible human beings; and we may be allowed to suggest that perhaps the excellent Miss Exeter hardly made sufficient allowance for the sportiveness common to young creatures.

Here Elma came in. No living mortal could withstand Elma, let alone Miss Exeter—Elma on an errand of mercy, least of all. For one thing, it was never for herself the petitioner spoke; it was never her own cause she pleaded. Again, there would be such a wistful eye, and lurking anxiety, and yet such a sort of confidence withal about the youthful ambassadress, that had it been a heart of stone which listened, it almost must have melted. And again—but why enumerate? After all, Miss Exeter was human, with a human weakness, and a human consciousness of it—and that weakness was her orphan charge, soon to be hers no longer. The day of parting, as we have said, came, and we will draw a veil over it.

"I really think you are almost sorry to come to us," alleged Elma's aunt, the same evening; "I really do, Elma," with a tinge of reproach in her tone. "Though Sir Thomas came up two days before Easter instead of after, on purpose to have you straight here. And—and I have had your room all made ready too."

"Oh, it is lovely, auntie. Why, auntie, it is

the prettiest, dearest little room—did I not tell you that I had never seen anything like it in my life?"

"Yes, my dear, yes. Oh, I did not mean that you were ungrateful, Elma; only that you did not seem *quite* so happy, *quite* so enchanted to get away from that tiresome school as I had thought you would be, and to know that your home is to be with us for altogether now."

"I am happy—very happy to know that my home is to be with you," replied Elma in a low voice. "I love you all so much, and oh, how kind you always are to me!"

"Dear child! I did not mean that. Why, it sounds as if I had been fishing for compliments, Elma! Dear me! All I meant was, why do you not look gayer, merrier, child?"

"I have just parted with a number of friends," and Elma's voice trembled a little, "some of them dear friends, auntie."

"Ye-es, to be sure, my love." Lady Alfreton moved uneasily in her chair.

"They were sorry to see me go. When we said good-bye to each other, a good many—cried."

"They were fond of you, I dare say."

"Miss Exeter did not cry."

"No?"

"But her eyes were red and swollen. Auntie, that dear, kind, good Miss Exeter loved me better than any one of them all; and I think she felt that she was giving me up for ever."

Now a few days previously Lady Alfreton had held a little consultation in this wise:—

"I am ready to admit that Elma is well educated, and has been done as much justice to in that respect as could be possible. But mere book-learning is not everything; and though I have not a word to say against Miss Exeter, who is really a nice, sensible person, I still object to schools in the abstract, and—and I cannot help hoping that our niece will not make quite as constant allusion to Haverstock Hill in the future as she has done in the past."

"As to girls' schools in general, Lady Alfreton, I fully agree in your opinion," replied the lady to whom the above was addressed, a cheerful, sensible county neighbour, one of those residents near the Towers whom Piers had suggested to

his mother as an associate. "I do not care for the ordinary young ladies' seminary, I own; for when one has a number of daughters, as I have, a schoolroom routine at home is to my mind in every way preferable. But there are girls—your niece is one of them—whose circumstances render school life an absolute necessity. For such as those, I cannot help fancying from what I gathered when Elma was here, that Miss Exeter's establishment must be an excellent one."

"Oh, very; oh, certainly. Excellent in all respects." Lady Alfreton was invariably valiant on behalf of the school *as* a school, nowadays. "But still I think you will understand, my dear Mrs. Wotherham, that there can be no need—no occasion for—for Elma's keeping up her connection with it after Easter."

Now here was Elma with her head upon her aunt's lap, softly murmuring how Miss Exeter loved her, and how she had foreboded an eternal separation.

Of course Elma's aunt gave way. A little word at the right moment has the weight of thousands.

Miss Exeter should be welcome in Park Lane whenever she chose to come; Elma might visit the corner house on Haverstock Hill whenever she chose to go. And Lady Alfreton felt herself to be amply repaid for both concessions by the stealing forth presently of all the stored-up sunlight of that most sunny nature.

For, to be sure, what had Elma now to wish for? Miss Exeter had been the test.

If her aunt had been cold and untouched when the subject of Miss Exeter had arisen, it would have been easy to show how all requests of a similar nature would fare. If, on the other hand, auntie were to be her best, kindest self —and this auntie had been, and all was right.

As she sat there in the sweet April twilight, caressing fondly the jewelled hand she held, drinking in the scents from the fresh young leaves without, and casting a loving eye round the familiar beauties within the chamber, Elma mused and pondered over a thousand loving, generous-hearted schemes. Self was prominent in none of them. But if through one and all there ran a golden thread, which, scarcely even

visible to her own eye, yet made every vision the brighter, and thus more endearing, who can blame her?

Ought we not to think of the absent? Are we to forget those who love us, just because they are not present to our view at the moment?

Elma went through a whole London season before Piers came home.

Whether or not he remained abroad till the end of June, on purpose to let her do this, he never said; but it is certain that almost the first question he asked after his return was this: "And Elma, is she unchanged? Has the world spoilt her, or not? She has tried it now? Tell me what it has done."

It almost seemed as though Lady Alfreton had discovered by instinct the feeling which prompted this swift demand. Her answer was equally prompt and to the purpose—

"Piers, the world has not spoilt, because it could not spoil. I am a poor weak woman, and I own it has given me a new zest in life to see the admiration and attention with which that dear child has been greeted wherever she has

gone. She has been quite one of the reigning beauties of the season, and she is as untouched by all the flattery and homage she has met with as though it had been another's. She is the dearest, most dutiful girl to me; she attends me wherever I go—always ready, always willing and pleased,—she writes my notes and letters—I am a sad, lazy creature nowadays; she goes down to the House with Sir Thomas, and rides with Juliet,—I cannot think how she does it all, and—and the rest besides."

"What is the rest?" asked he.

"Oh, my dear Piers, you would hardly know us here. To be sure, I do not do very much myself—but Juliet quite goes in with Elma in everything. Juliet has the more leisure, because she really does not care so much for society now—you know she has been through a good many seasons, and she says she is growing old, foolish girl! Be that how it may, however, she certainly looks younger, and brighter, and infinitely more attractive than she used to do, now that Elma has found occupation for her. She is busy with all sorts of people, I assure

you. Not the very poor; the girls tell me that there are others better fitted than they for that sort of work—and I own I cannot help being glad of it;—but they seem to have endless curious kinds of people to look after, and be kind to, and give pleasure to. You know I told you of Elma's *penchant* for *half-and-halfs?* Well, it is *half-and-halfs* that she still ferrets out, and hovers over, and makes much of, and finally interests Juliet or Mabel in. Not but what Mabel is clever enough at finding them out for herself," proceeded the speaker, laughing. "It really is diverting, Piers, it really is, to see the way in which that poor Duchess of Mertoun is trundled hither and thither, this way and that, at the bidding of that great, arbitrary daughter of hers. I like Mabel; she is a dear girl, and Elma's greatest friend, you know;—but she has none of Elma's little endearing ways. It is always 'Mamma, you must do this,' or, 'Mamma, you must do that,' with her. To be sure the duchess has brought it on herself. But it certainly is not pretty; it is not pleasant to listen to. Now with Elma"——

But Piers did not need to be told about Elma.

He waited only a very short time, and then he said one quiet evening at the Towers, when they were alone as before in the big bay-window—

"Elma, do you remember some presumptuous things I once said to you in this place?"

Then Elma's heart began to beat. He had said here and there a presumptuous thing or two, not in that place, and since the time referred to, you understand; and she, I think, divined, as a girl will, that there might be more of that kind yet to come, when prefaced by such a question.

"I don't know if you can love me," the speaker went on, in a still softer undertone, "but I think I could never love any other girl than you. It began so long ago, so much before I knew. You were but a child then—it is two years since—but child as you were, I could not help watching you and wondering about you. I was afraid—I thought—yes, I will own it—I felt almost sure that it could not last; that you could not grow up the true blossom of such a bud. Now that I have seen, I believe. You have done all, and more than all, I prophesied, when we were here

together last. You have won my parents, led my sister, influenced other households, adorned our own—and now, Elma, now—what will you do for me?"

She half turned towards him.

"I am yours if you will have me," he whispered. "Yours; make me what you will. Only take me"——

And how could she but take him?

THE END.